ETHNIC GERMANS IN THE SOVIET UNION: THE PEOPLE OF CHORTITZA, 1939-1949

A Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

During the Second World War, Nazi and Soviet governments had distinctly different ideologies as well as different reasons for targeting the Soviet Union's German population for relocation. While the Soviets saw ethnic Germans as a national security threat, the Nazis desired to use them to pursue plans for racial social engineering. Using *Einwandererzentralstelle* and International Red Cross Tracing Service records, the case study of the inhabitants of the ethnic German settlement of Chortitza explore key moments in the population's navigation of the Second World War from Soviet deportation to German occupation to resettlement and life in post-war Germany.

These moments reveal that ethnic Germans had continuously shaped their ethnic identity during their time in Russia and the Soviet Union. In the 1920s and 1930s, ethnic Germans began to adapt their German culture to the surrounding Ukrainian and Russian ways of life in an effort to lessen chances of deportation by the NKVD. This malleable ethnic identity became especially fluid during World War II as ethnic Germans struggled to survive the war. Evidence of changes in their ethnic identity include being noticeably different from Germans living in the Reich. Therefore, to an extent, their ethnicity was invented and dependent upon circumstances (varying borders, loyalties, and survival). Their collective identity became instrumental in successfully navigating war as a village unit. As their identity became manipulative, ethnic Germans used their German ethnicity as well as their Soviet roots to survive the war. Therefore, this master's thesis argues that the Chortitza Germans had agency to highlight their ethnicity as Germans or to

emphasize their citizenship as Soviet-Germans depending upon whose control (Nazi or Soviet) they fell under. Using the Chortitza Germans as a case study enables us to look beyond Soviet and Nazi ideology to show how ethnic Germans struggled to fulfill Nazi or Soviet expectations in order to escape dire consequences.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

"*Volksdeutsche*," "Germans from Russia," "Soviet-Germans," "Ethnic Germans" - the many names mirror their varying identities.[1] Emigrating from the German states to the Ukraine and Russia in the late eighteenth century, these immigrants were invited by Catherine the Great; they settled the spaces that later became part of the Soviet Union. In 1789, Mennonites from Danzig, West Prussia founded the settlement of Chortitza along the west bank of the Dnieper River. Chortitza and its surrounding villages became the largest Mennonite settlement within Russia and Ukraine. Despite its size, geographic location, and history, few historians have researched the ethnic population that lived there from 1789 to 1943. Historians and the public alike who are familiar with the term "Germans from Russia" often think of either the Volga Germans or of immigration to the American Midwest in the early 1900s. This thesis, however, explores the lives of individuals who lived in Chortitza in the 1930s and early 1940s before being resettled by the German government.

The story of ethnic Germans in Russia begins with the Russian government's xenophobia.[2] Even ethnic Germans living in the Soviet Union 130 years after original settlement were not exempt from being targeted as an ethnic group. Ethnic Germans were deemed a possible fifth column, individuals who maintained traitorous ties to Germany. These attitudes toward ethnic Germans resulted in the Soviet government's

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[1] This thesis will primarily use the term ethnic Germans to describe this group of people.
[2] Yet, it is also true that Russia and later the Soviet Union employed ethnic Germans in numerous capacities including government-level positions.

arrests and deportations in the 1930s. Despite Russification and collectivization during this time, in which churches were closed and the German language was no longer taught in settlement schools, the Soviet Union still identified the Chortitza population as ethnic Germans. While the population may have preferred a different identity, they were powerless to persuade the Soviet government otherwise. Yet, ethnic Germans still had agency. After the beginning of World War II, those in Chortitza and other German settlements decided that identifying as ethnic Germans would be more advantageous than evacuating east with the Soviet population. They knew that their choice of identity would result in either life or death. Conforming to Nazi standards enabled ethnic Germans to receive extra resources during the German occupation as well as evacuation assistance in 1943 to the Reich. Yet, after the war ethnic Germans were still in danger as the Soviet Union made efforts to repatriate those who had once lived within its domain. During and immediately after the war, ethnic Germans had to negotiate a world of shifting borders and changing loyalties in which they chose the better alternative.

The realization that my grandmother who claimed to be German, who spoke German, and who had German citizenship before immigrating to the United States had been born in the Soviet Union began my interest in this ethnic group. I sought to understand the complicated existence of the ethnic Germans, specifically those who had lived in the Soviet Union. My personal connections to the ethnic German experience during World War II facilitates my access to oral history sources, but the study of this population is of much broader significance. Themes of wartime disruptions, forced migrations, belonging, citizenship, race, and especially identity all contribute to the

telling of this saga - the story of the people of Chortitza. It is my hope that studying this population of 13,000 individuals will give a voice to thousands of other ethnic Germans who otherwise may be misunderstood or forgotten.

Historiography

The ethnic German experience in Russia has been framed three different ways by historians. The first framework is the victimization narrative.[3] This narrative has, until recently, tried to ensure that ethnic Germans were viewed as victims. Monographs within this category often begin in the late eighteenth century with Catherine the Great's invitation to settle Russia and continue through the late 1800s and early 1900s when the ethnic Germans' conditions started deteriorating. As the ethnic German contingent living in Russia and later the Soviet Union received attention during the famines of 1887, 1922, and 1932-1933, historians and non-historians alike often refer to their period of hardship as proof of their victimization. These narratives discuss the loss of freedoms during World War One, chaos during the Russian civil war, as well as collectivization, deportation, and Russification of the 1920s and 1930s. By emphasizing the 1930s, authors avoid discussion of 1941 to 1945 including evacuation, resettlement, and the complexities of Germanness. While little attention is given to the World War II years,

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[3] Alfred de Zayas, *A Terrible Revenge: The Ethnic Cleansing of the East European Germans, 1944-1950* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994); John Philipps, *The Tragedy of the Soviet Germans* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994). Samuel Sinner, *The Open Wound* (Fargo, ND: Germans from Russia Heritage Collection, North Dakota State University Libraries, 2000). James W. Long, *From Privileged to Dispossessed: The Volga Germans, 1860-1917* (Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 1988).

authors also briefly use the treatment of ethnic Germans by the Nazis (1943) and Poles (1945) to strengthen their case that ethnic Germans were indeed victims.[4]

The victimization narrative has been popular because it diverts attention away from ethnic German participation in the Holocaust and acceptance of Nazi dogma. It is able to shift the blame off ethnic Germans by making them appear separate from Nazis and other collaborating Germans. Instead, these narratives focus on those who died by famine, in the Soviet gulags, or during resettlement. For ethnic Germans and their descendants, the victimization narrative also provides a way to process wartime experiences. Framed as victims of two brutal regimes (Germany and the Soviet Union), it brings meaning and answers the "why me?" question to those who suffered.[5] This is not to delegitimize the experiences of those who were treated wrongly. Yet, there are extremes to avoid. In recent years, some historians have used the framework of victimization to argue that the term genocide should be applied to the deaths of ethnic Germans at the hands of the Soviet Union during the 1930s, 1945 (as refugees), and 1950s (in labor camps after repatriation to the Soviet Union).[6] Acceptance and use of this term in scholarly circles would only perpetuate the victimization myth.

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[4] Zayas, *A Terrible Revenge*. Philipps, *The Tragedy of the Soviet Germans.* Sinner, *The Open Wound*. Long, *From Privileged to Dispossessed.*

[5] While persecuted groups often feel as if they are the only ones being targeted, the Soviet governments did not single out ethnic Germans. Rather, the Soviet Union applied similar policies to the Chechens, Koreans, and Finns, Crimean Tatars, and others.

[6] Zayas, *A Terrible Revenge*. Philipps, *The Tragedy of the Soviet Germans*. Sinner, *The Open Wound.*

The second major way that historians have framed the history of ethnic Germans is through institutional narratives.[7] These works focus on the various institutions that had jurisdiction over ethnic Germans including the *Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle* (Ethnic German Liaison Office) and *Reichskommissar für die Festigung Deutschen Volkstums* (Reich Commission for the Strengthening of Germandom). While there are works discussing institutions during World War II when Nazi Germany took a special interest in its ethnic population, institutional narratives also examine the state during tsarist and Soviet times and its involvement in creating nations as well as attitudes toward ethnicity. Institutional narratives grew out of an increased study of the Holocaust in the 1980s. These books undermine previous victimization narratives by specifically pointing out ethnic German collaboration with the Nazis both in Ukraine and Poland. They also reveal government policies behind ethnic German resettlement. They lack, however, a study of the experiences of the ethnic Germans themselves and often broadly paint the ethnic German population as a homogeneous group. These more recent studies on ethnic Germans during World War II have continued to shape perceptions of their experience. As the focus shifts from portraying ethnic Germans as victims to revealing their role in the Holocaust, ethnic Germans are starting to be studied within an appropriate context of

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[7] Eric C. Steinhart, *The Holocaust and the Germanization of Ukraine* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015). Wendy Lower, *Nazi Empire-Building in Ukraine* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2005). Valdis O. Lumans, *Himmler's Auxiliaries* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1993). Robert Koehl, *RKFDV: German Resettlement and Population Policy, 1939-1945: A History of the Reich Commission for the Strengthening of Germandom* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957). Ingeborg Fleischhauer, and Benjamin Pinkus, *The Soviet Germans Past and Present* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986).

their relationship both to Nazi Germany as well as the Soviet Union, as seen particularly in Timothy Snyder's work.[8]

The third and final way historians have characterized the ethnic German experience in their writings is through *Alltagsgeschichte* or everyday life narratives.[9] *Alltagsgeschichte* is also a relatively newer framework although not as common as the victimization narrative or institutional narrative approaches. Popularized in the early 1970s by German historian Alf Lüdtke and used later by Christopher R. Browning,[10] this framework is social history from the bottom-up. *Alltagsgeschichte* narratives use different approaches including gender history.[11]

This framework is important because it presents a more nuanced picture of people's lives. It is useful for characterizing the ethnic German experience because it does not portray all ethnic Germans in Russia either as perpetrators or victims. Its focus on society and not institutions and victimization illuminates the fact that the hundreds of thousands of ethnic Germans were not a homogeneous group nor did they act collectively. It also explains outside forces that influenced decisions; for instance, when ethnic Germans were perpetrators it was often because of feelings of coercion or the threat of worse alternatives that they complied. As Browning argues, this methodology

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[8] This is also clearly seen in Eric Steinhart's *The Holocaust and the Germanization of Ukraine* and in Wendy Lower's *Nazi Empire-Building and the Holocaust in Ukraine.*

[9] Alf Lüdtke, *The History of Everyday Life: Reconstructing Historical Experiences and ways of Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995). Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998). Marlene Epp, *Women without Men: Mennonite Refugees of the Second World War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000).

[10]Browning, *Ordinary Men*. Browning uses *Alltagsgeschichte* in this book to show the motives behind a group of soldiers who participated in the Holocaust. He specifically used this framework to demonstrate that there needs to be a nuanced approach and not blanketing of reasons for participation.

[11] Epp, *Women without Men*

allows historians to view a society from a neutral position while attempting to differentiate what was normal and abnormal in the daily lives of a study's subjects.[12]

While victimization narrative, institutional narratives, and *Alltagsgeschichte* form the bulk of the historiography surrounding the ethnic German experience, for the purposes of this thesis, it will also be helpful to note what has been written regarding the state's influence on identity. While there are few works that specifically show the presence of the state dictating the identity of its subjects,[13] Jeremy King's work traces the history of Budweis, a town comprised of Germans and Czechs in present-day Czechoslovakia.[14] In 1918 when Czechoslovakia was formed, the German language became obsolete, yet Germans were not required to change their nationality. After the annexation of Czechoslovakia by Nazi Germany, however, many Czechs attempted to become recognized as Germans.[15] King argues that the formation of the hybrid Budweiser as equally Czech and German, whose nationality was defined by language, enabled the inhabitants of Budweis to weather the storms of shifting loyalties and identities during the first half of the twentieth century.[16] Historian Chad Bryant's similar work, an outgrowth of King's study, shows the Nazis institutionalizing racial identities

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[12] Browning, *Ordinary Men*, xix.
[13] For other examples geographically and chronologically removed see: Shira Robinson, *Citizen Strangers: Palestinians and the Birth of Israel's Liberal Settler State* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013). Hillel Cohen, *Good Arabs: The Israeli Security Agencies and the Israeli Arabs, 1948-1967* (University of California Press, 2011).
[14] Jeremy King, *Budweisers into Czechs and Germans: A Local History of Bohemian Politics, 1848-1948* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).
[15] King, *Budweisers into Czechs and Germans,* 184.
[16] Ibid., 2.

for the practical purpose of gaining control over the Sudetenland.[17] Bryant describes the struggle of Czechs who were to fulfill Nazi expectations of what their identity as "good Germans" should be. Hugo Service's work, on the other hand, shows how the Polish government encouraged Germans to become Poles during the expulsions that took place following World War II.[18] While there are other accounts involving central European countries with similar dilemmas, this thesis will help to develop this historiography.

Ethnicity

Out of the debate about the nature of ethnicity has emerged two ways of viewing ethnicity: primordial and invented.[19] The appropriate definition of ethnicity for this thesis is a combination of the two. For ethnic Germans, ethnicity was primordial because ethnic Germans built their ethnicity upon solid cultural identifiers. Ethnic Germans spoke the German language, practiced Lutheranism and Catholicism, and observed German traditions. Mennonites too held tightly to the German language and culture even as their religious traditions set them apart from other non-Mennonite ethnic Germans. Regardless, ethnic Germans had a distinct culture from the surrounding Ukrainian and Russian population that they had brought with them from the German states in the eighteenth century. When scrutinized by the Nazi government and the *Volksdeutsche*

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[17] Chad Bryant, *Prague in Black: Nazi Rule and Czech Nationalism* (Harvard, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2009).
[18] Hugo Service, *Germans to Poles: Communism, Nationalism and Ethnic Cleansing after the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
[19] Wsevolod W. Isajiw, "Definition and Dimensions of Ethnicity: A Theoretical Framework" In *Challenges of Measuring an Ethnic World: Science, politics and reality: Proceedings of the Joint Canada-United States Conference on the Measurement of Ethnicity April 1-3, 1992* edited by Statistics Canada and U.S. Bureau of the Census (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1993), 407-427.

Mittelstelle (*VoMi*) one hundred fifty years later, their ethnicity was still measured by German language skills with special emphasis placed upon genealogy.

Yet, ethnic Germans had continuously shaped their ethnic identity during their time in Russia and the Soviet Union. In the 1920s and 1930s, ethnic Germans began to adapt their German culture to the surrounding Ukrainian and Russian ways of life in an effort to lessen chances of deportation by the NKVD. This malleable ethnic identity became especially fluid during World War II as ethnic Germans struggled to survive the war. Evidence of changes in their ethnic identity include being noticeably different from Germans living in the Reich. Therefore, to an extent, their ethnicity was invented and dependent upon circumstances (varying borders, loyalty, and survival). The collective identity of Chortitza Germans became instrumental in successfully navigating war as a village unit. As their identity became manipulative, ethnic Germans used their German ethnicity as well as their Soviet roots to survive the war.

Case for the Case Study

Studying Chortitza was a natural choice for me because of my heritage, which facilitated my research access. Yet, there are multiple other reasons that qualify Chortitza as the appropriate choice for a case study. Chortitza was the most important and largest Mennonite settlement in the Soviet Union. The town of Chortitza was the county seat and an important center for commerce and government within the settlement. That most of the ethnic Germans living here belonged to the Mennonite faith also adds to its uniqueness. Few intermarriages occurred between Mennonites and Ukrainians, Jews, or Russians. In addition, Mennonite stances on religion, government, and military

service also added to the uniqueness of Chortitza. The German language remained the most used language, although in the 1930s schools taught Russian.[20] Chortitza was one of the colonies that retained a strong ethnic German identity through language, religion, and culture. Another important factor was that individuals from Chortitza maintained ties with Germany. Some individuals sent their children to school there, while others regularly corresponded with relatives that resided in Germany. In addition, with a population of 13,000 in 1930, the Chortitza settlement is the perfect size to be able to have a good number yet get to know the inhabitants as individuals. Sources are also readily available from Mennonite archives, *Landsmannschaft* - like organizations, and residents are still alive.

The geographical location of Chortitza played an important role in shaping the settlement's experiences; it facilitated interaction with Soviet and Nazi armies as well as the ordeal of borders moving around them. Its location on the west bank of Dnieper also ensured that the majority of its inhabitants were still present when the German Army arrived in 1941 as opposed to being evacuated by the Soviet Army. Although evacuations by both Soviet and German forces did occur, the inhabitants of Chortitza had time to react to the German evacuation as opposed to leaving on short notice or being taken in the middle of the night. Its location also dictated that the Chortitza residents would be resettled in 1943.

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[20] Platt (Low) German was most commonly spoken although High German was taught in school and used for official business.

Thesis

During the Second World War, the Nazi and Soviet governments had distinctly different ideologies as well as different reasons for targeting the Soviet Union's German population for relocation. While the Soviets saw ethnic Germans as a national security threat, the Nazis desired to use them to pursue plans for racial social engineering. This master's thesis argues that the Chortitza Germans had agency to highlight their ethnicity as Germans or to emphasize their citizenship as Soviet-Germans depending upon whose control (Nazi or Soviet) they fell under. Using the Chortitza Germans as a case study enables us to look beyond Soviet and Nazi ideology to show how ethnic Germans struggled to fulfill Nazi or Soviet expectations in order to escape dire consequences.

This thesis is divided into six chapters. Chapter one describes the 1930s and the difficulties of deportation, Russification, and collectivization during Stalin's rule. Chapter two continues with the declaration of World War II and Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union. The German occupation of Chortitza in 1941, as described in chapter three, enabled a return to life similar to the tsarist times as well as registration with the VoMi and opportunities to prove one's Germanness. Chapter four focuses on 1943 as ethnic Germans were moved from their Chortitza homes and resettled in Germany and Poland as Soviet armies rolled back the German occupation. Resettlement was a time of trial as they had to negotiate changing Nazi criteria. Chapter five discusses the end of the war and life in 1945 as ethnic Germans tried to avoid repatriation by the Soviet Union and did whatever they could to remain free. Lastly, chapter six concludes the thesis with

the phenomenon of *Aussiedler,* evidence of the continuing pertinence of ethnic German history.

CHAPTER II

BEGINNINGS OF HOPE, YEARS OF DISAPPOINTMENT

Sophie Friederike Auguste von Anhalt-Zerbst-Dornburg ascended to the Russian throne in 1762. Although of German heritage, Sophie's marriage to Peter III and his later assassination gave her the title Tsarina Catherine the Great. It was at this time that Russia annexed territory along the west side of the Dnieper River in the Ukraine, land populated by the Cossacks. Catherine the Great's 1762 and 1763 manifestos opened up immigration for non-Jews from all over Europe; however, the lure of America and bans on emigration resulted in mostly émigrés from the states of Baden, the Palatinate, Bavaria, and Hesse. Settling the area along the Dnieper River, the Russian steppes soon became fields of wheat.[21] Catherine the Great's German heritage as well as Russia's expansion provided the gateway through which German settlers entered Russian territory in the mid to late eighteenth century and established settlements that lasted for over one hundred fifty years.

Push and Pull Factors

There were many reasons why Germans responded to Catherine the Great's manifesto by immigrating. Historian Irina Mukhina describes their move as the result of "no longer [feeling] welcome."[22] Within the German states mandatory military service, waning religious freedoms, and economic failure encouraged Germans to move.[23] The

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[21] N.J. Kroeker, *First Mennonite Villages in Russia, 1789-1943: Khortitsa - Rosenthal* (Cloverdale, B.C.: D.W. Friesen & Sons, 1981), 10.
[22] Irina Mukhina, *Germans of the Soviet Union* (New York: Rutledge, 2007), 18.
[23] Karl Stumpp, *The German-Russians: Two Centuries of Pioneering* (Bonn, New York: Atlantic Forum, 1967), 12. The charter which stipulated the land rights and other privileges of the Mennonite Chortitza

manifesto granted freedom of religion, tax exemptions, free land that would belong to the settlement, the right to own private property and be able to inherit it, and the ability to leave Russia freely after paying a tax.[24] Catherine the Great's promise of benefits and preservation of their German identity while living in Russia lured these Germans from Russia, as they would be called, southeast. In the Volga region alone 27,000 settlers arrived during the 1760s.[25]

Growth of Chortitza

In 1789, responding to Catherine the Great's offer, four hundred Mennonite families from Danzig, West Prussia arrived along the Dnieper River south of present-day Dnepropetrovsk.[26] Deciding to establish their settlement along the west bank of the Dnieper River, the colonists found themselves in territory newly acquired by Catherine the Great.[27] Chortitza (Khortitsa), the mother settlement, was born.[28] Between 1789 and 1928, a total of eighteen towns formed the Chortitza settlement. The original group of settlers from Danzig founded eight of these villages in the summer of 1789, including

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settlers was treasured. Printed both in German and Russian, the charter had the tsar's seal on it as well. Kroeker, *First Mennonite Villages in Russia*, 20.

[24] Stumpp, *The German-Russians,* 10.

[25] Fred Koch, *Volga Germans in Russia and the Americas, From 1763 to the Present.* (London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1977), xv. Stumpp, *The German-Russians,* 10.

[26] Irina Mukhina, *Germans of the Soviet Union* (New York: Rutledge, 2007), 9. Table 1.1. Cornelius Bergmann and Cornelius Krahn, "Chortitza Mennonite Settlement (Zaporizhia Oblast, Ukraine)." *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online* (1955) http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/C4652.html (accessed Dec. 9, 2014).

[27] The term *colonists* is used in the historiography for Germans from Russia, especially those who were farmers. This word usage was to set them apart from Russian peasants. Mukhina, *Germans of the Soviet Union*, 20.

[28] The reader must understand that Chortitza is both the name of a village as well as the name of the settlement of which Chortitza village is a part. In this paper, the author when referring to Chortitza will be referring to the village unless stated otherwise.

Einlage, Neuendorf, Rosenthal, and, of course, Chortitza.[29] At first, the settlers used the land as grazing pasture for sheep; however, farmers soon planted orchards and started growing grain. One hundred years later, Chortitza and the surrounding colonies were culturally and technologically advanced. When Karl Rosse, a young German living in Western Europe, toured the shoe factories his family owned in Blumenthal, Segensthal, and Zaporozhe in the 1890s, he came to update and install machinery.[30] The area was advanced in technology; other factories produced farming implements and even steam engines.[31] When a hydroelectric dam opened in 1932, this area of Ukraine between Alexandrovsk and Ekaterinoslav became known in the region as "the industrial engine of southern Russia."[32] Between settlement and the dawn of the twentieth century, the ethnic German identity of those living in Russia remained much the same. This "golden age" was a time of peace, prosperity, and relatively limited government interference. The village of Chortitza was the *volost* (municipal center) of the Chortitza settlement. The town was well developed with factories, photography studios, two hospitals, a dentist, several schools, including an institute for training teachers, Mennonite and Russian Orthodox churches, and even a library.[33]

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[29] Germans from Russia Heritage Society, "Mennonite Villages in the Chortitza Colony" http://www.grhs.org/ villages/kherson/jekaterinoslaw/chortitza.html (accessed Nov. 15, 2014).
[30] His family would live in the Soviet Union in German settlements until 1943 when his future grandchildren would experience resettlement by the Germans.
[31] *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online (GAMEO)*, s.v. "Economic Progress" http://www.gameo.org/ encyclopedia/contents/C4652.html (accessed January 4, 2013). Some of these factories included brick yards and factories producing starch and clocks, wagons and plows, and steam engines. Helmut Herbert and William Schroeder, *Mennonite Historical Atlas* (Winnipeg: Springfield Publishers, 1990), 91.
[32] David G. Rempel, "From Danzig to Russia: The First Mennonite Migration," *Mennonite Life* (January 1969) Reprinted in *Preservings* no. 20 (June 2002): 18.
[33] Rudy P. Friesen, *Building on the Past* (Winnipeg: Raguda Publications, 2004), 104.

Germans remained distinct and separate from the Ukrainians and Jews living there. Visitors remarked that the "the people, their character, their language, their dress, their dwellings and household furnishings [are] German," and "every dish and container, and even the domestic animals, the Pomeranian and the poodle, the cow and the goat as well. The colonists even know how to give nature itself a German appearance…Everything is German."[34] Marriages in Chortitza also remained constrained by ethnicity as well as religion (even the Mennonite church was split at this point into Conference Mennonites and Mennonite Brethren). German Mennonites married other German Mennonites, establishing common Mennonite last names such as Epp, Reimer, Rempel, and Toews. The birthrate for Germans in Russia was higher than their Russian and Ukrainian counterparts even during times of deportation and familial separation. Between 1932 and 1937, German-Russians had 47.3 births per 1,000 individuals as compared to Ukrainians averaging 40.3 births per 1,000.[35] The average number of children in 1942 for couples living in Schönhörst, a village in the Chortitza settlement totaled 5.9 children per family. However, 31 percent of the village's children had died in childhood.[36] Despite high infant mortality rates, the Mennonite population in Russia doubled every quarter of a century.[37] These high birth rates helped ethnic Germans establish themselves in Ukraine and led to the creation of daughter villages and the

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[34] Baron August von Haxthausen, 1847. In Friesen, *Building on the Past,* 97.
[35] Stumpp, *The German-Russians,* 26.
[36] The total number of living children from 285 Mennonite couples registered equaled 1,275. However, also noted were the 395 children of these same 285 families that had passed away. Karl Stumpp, Familienverzeichnis der Dorfes Schönhörst, Fragenbogen Nr. 1, May 28, 1942.
[37] Bernd G.Längin, *The Russian Germans under the Double Eagle and the Soviet Star: Including a Pictorial History of Landscapes, Cities, an People* (Fargo, ND: Germans from Russia Heritage Collection, North Dakota State University Libraries, 2013), 80.

enlargement of settlements like Chortitza which grew to a total of eighteen villages.[38] The size of Chortitza also expanded with its population, stretching from 33,000 *dessiatines* to 150,000 by the 1917 Russian Revolution.[39]

Disappearing Freedoms

Until the early 1900s, the Germans living in Russia had the ability to choose their own identity and keep it without interference from the state. Political changes through growing restrictions, however, began to erode the German-Russian existence that this population had maintained. The difficulties that ethnic Germans experienced at the beginning of the twentieth century prepared them for the malleable ethnic identity they later assumed in the 1940s. Their experience in Ukraine under Stalin offers an explanation for why ethnic Germans, during World War II, anticipated German occupation and later evacuated with the German Army.

Ethnic Germans were not the only persecuted minority group in the Soviet Union. J. Otto Pohl describes how the Koreans, Finns, Chechens, and Tatars were also not allowed to have schools taught in their own language. These ethnic minorities were also deported away from border regions and were considered traitors during World War I and World War II.[40] German-Soviet relations were unique, however. Steinhart argues that "ethnic Germans constituted a particular concern for Soviet authorities."[41] Ethnic

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[38] Herbert and Schroeder, *Mennonite Historical Atlas*, 91.
[39] Friesen, *Building on the Past,* 98. A *dessiatine* is equivalent to 2.7 acres.
[40] J. Otto Pohl, "The Deportation and Destruction of the German Minority in the USSR," 2001. http://www.volgagermans.net/norka/docs/Deportation%20and%20Destruction%20Soviet%20Germans.pdf (accessed Jan. 26, 2016).
[41] Eric C. Steinhart, *The Holocaust and the Germanization of Ukraine* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 29.

Germans had opposed the rise of Bolshevism; in the aftermath of the 1917 Russian Revolution, ethnic German villages supported the occupying German Army as well as the White Army. Prior to this, many ethnic Germans had supported the tsar even while disagreeing with some of his ethnic policies.[42] Ethnic Germans were also the largest ethnic minority in the Soviet Union prior to World War II.

During the tumultuous first three decades of the twentieth century, ethnic Germans were affected from the political turmoil. During World War I, ethnic Germans were moved away from border areas due to the belief that they might cooperate with the German enemy. Chortitza and the other ethnic German villages in southern Ukraine were caught between the White Army and the Red Army changing hands multiple times. In addition, the disparity of wealth between native Russians and Ukrainians and wealthy German farmers (kulaks) led to loss of property for ethnic Germans. Marauding groups of bandits roved the colonies, murdering and plundering as they went under the guide of Nestor Makhno who, at one point, had a following of 100,000 persons.[43] Having once lived in the Mennonite settlements near the Black Sea, he now returned to kill and steal, resulting in horrific stories of murder. For instance, in Eichendorf on November 26, 1919, bandits killed eighty-six people including four women.[44] In total, the Chortitza settlement lost 144 men to Makhno's gang.[45] In addition to losing individuals to murder and their cattle to the marauders, a typhoid epidemic swept through the German-Russian

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[42] Steinhart, *The Holocaust and the Germanization of Ukraine*, 28.
[43] GAMEO, "Mahkno, Nestor" http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Makhno,_Nestor_(1888-1934) (accessed Jan. 20, 2014).
[44] Ibid.
[45] Herbert and Schroeder, *Mennonite Historical Atlas*, 91.

settlements during this time as well. Between eleven and fifteen percent of Chortitza's population succumbed to the disease.[46]

Ethnic Germans had also lost their exemption from military service. The opportunity to live in a place that did not require the violation of pacifist beliefs had attracted ethnic German Mennonites to the Ukraine in the late 1700s. The participation of Mennonite leaders in negotiations resulted in the ability to file as conscientious objectors. During times of war, Mennonite ethnic Germans were expected instead to serve as medics and during times of peace, they were to participate in the *trudarmee* or forestry service.[47] Although in the Soviet Army one could file for conscientious objector status, the loss of privileges that the Germans from Russia had previously enjoyed encouraged many to immigrate to Canada in the 1890s and 1920s. Indeed, some historians argue that without the Soviet government agreeing to alternatives for Mennonites such as forestry work, perhaps none would have wanted to remain in the Soviet Union.[48] Life in the *trudarmee* or forestry service was difficult. Taken from their families, conscripts were transported to the forests of Siberia to fell trees. Limited food rations under slave-like conditions encouraged escape whenever possible.[49]

The German language which had been used to teach children in ethnic German schools was also replaced with Russian at the turn of the twentieth century. While

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[46] Herbert and Schroeder, *Mennonite Historical Atlas*, 91; Karl Stumpp, *Bericht über das Gebiet Chortitza In Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, s.v. "Chortitza Mennonite Settlement (Zaporizhia Oblast, Ukraine)."
[47] John B. Toews, *Czars, Soviets, and Mennonites* (Newton, Kansas: Faith and Life Press, 1982), 13.
[48] Längin, *The Russian Germans under the Double Eagle and the Soviet Star*, 80.
[49] Edith Elizabeth Friesen, *Journey into Freedom: One Family's Real Life Drama* (Winnipeg: Raduga Publications, 2003), 49.

parents such as Rudolph and Olga Zaft wanted their children to learn German, they were forced to send them to schools where only Russian was taught. It was now the parents' and villagers' responsibility to pass on their German heritage to the younger generation. In addition to this, German language newspapers such as the *Odessaer Zeitung* and the *Neue Hauswirtschaftskalender*, which began publication in 1863, both stopped printing in 1914 and 1915 respectively.[50] The end of these periodicals was a result of Russification and bans on use of the German language during World War II.[51]

Ethnic German farms that their forbearers had worked so hard to establish, modernize, and make profitable were also confiscated. Ethnographer Karl Stumpp's data reveals that prior to collectivization German-owned property in 1914 was proportionally greater than land owned by Russians and Ukrainians.[52] For instance, the government of Jekaterinoslav which contained Chortitza and Dnepropetrovsk had a total population of 2,275,000 people, 125,000 (5.4 percent) of which were ethnic German. Ethnic Germans, however, owned 25 percent of the arable land.[53] The domination of the land changed first in 1915 with the Laws of Liquidation that restricted Germans from purchasing land and later with collectivization in 1928.[54] Collectivization forced formerly prosperous landowners to become menial laborers consistently lacking food. Rudolf Varesko, from Rosenthal in the Chortitza settlement, remembers how the scarcity of food forced his family to form a cooperative with their neighbors. While this saved them from

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[50] Stumpp, *The German Russians*, 9.
[51] Ibid., 31.
[52] For instance, in the Black Sea Area Germans owned 135 million acres, with only 2,025,000 of those being purchased acres.
[53] Stumpp, *The German Russians*, 24-25.
[54] Ibid., 31, 32.

starvation, their income came in the form of produce; therefore each year by February or March all they had to eat were a few potatoes. During the summers though, he and the other children had the task of picking apricots in the orchards giving them opportunity to consume the fruit as a supplement to their diet.[55] Not only was collectivization difficult, but in 1921 and 1932 famine caused by poor crop harvests and lack of surplus grain led to the deaths of 350,000 Germans in the Soviet Union as well as the intervention of American and German aid organizations that would later serve as "proof" of complicity with Germany during World War II.[56] This was but a foretaste, however, of the loss that occurred during the deportations of the 1930s.

With Russians viewing the ethnic German population as a threat, a dreaded visit by NKVD agents in the middle of the night usually meant imprisonment, forced labor, or death for the house's male members. Although the Soviet Union had been trying for years to russify its ethnic populations, an individual's roots were not easily forgotten. The ethnic Germans' connections to Germany as the originator of their language, culture, and religion were maintained through correspondence with relatives or by sending their children to Germany for advanced education; these activities were watched closely by Soviet officials. Anna Braun, a German Russian who lived in Einlage, another town in the Chortitza settlement, recalled how the Russians “one night [in 1936] …fetched my husband after they searched the house for three long hours” taking with them “letters

[55] Rudolf Varesko, Interview by Author. Hagerstown, MD. Dec. 13, 2013.
[56] Stumpp, *The German Russians*, 32, 33.

from our relatives in America."[57] The Soviets then imprisoned her husband and sentenced him to death. German-Russian historian Adam Giesinger stated, "From 1935 onward they [the German Russians] were effectively cut off from the outside world. Correspondence with foreign relatives and friends was treated as traitorous activity."[58] The Soviet government also found other ways to "prove" that the ethnic Germans were conspiring against them such as claiming that they refused to learn the language of their country of residence.[59] Herman Schmand, a German visitor to Ukraine, wrote that the *Volksdeutsche* were in the "worst condition" because of the Soviets.[60] Between 1929 and 1941, the Soviet Union had exiled ten percent or 1,456 individuals from the Chortitza settlement.[61] Even during the first months of the war, prior to the German occupation, circumstances were harsh. By 1941, forty-three percent of Chortitza citizens had lost their main provider.[62] Waldemar Koehn was a boy growing up in Waldheim, Ukraine. Ethnically German, the Koehn family had migrated to Ukraine in the nineteenth century. However, the Soviet Union still forced his father and uncles to dig ditches for the Soviet

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[57] Anna Braun, Interview with David Boder. Munich, Germany. Sept. 20, 1946.
[58] Adam Giesinger, *From Catherine to Khrushchev* quoted in R. Reuben Drefs, "The Lutheran Church in Russia, with special emphasis on Ukraine: Intertwined with the history of Russia" *Heritage Review* 39, no. 2 (June 2009): 11. It is impossible to argue that ethnic Germans were the only ethnic minority targeted in the Soviet Union. The Finns, Koreans, Chechens, and others were also viewed as spies and collaborators.
[59] Aleksandr M. Nekrich, *Pariahs, Partners, Predators: German-Soviet Relations, 1933-1941* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 83.
[60] H. Schmand to W. Heesch, 7 November 1942, Derzhavnyi Arkhiv Dnipropetrovs'koi Oblasti 2567/1/2/151-154 In Simone A. Ballezza "The Discourse over the Nationality Question in Nazi-Occupied Ukraine: The Generalbezirk Dnjepropetrowsk, 1941-3" *Journal of Contemporary History* 43, no. 4 (2008), 581.
[61] Karl Stumpp, *Bericht über das Gebiet Chortitza In Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, s.v. "Chortitza Mennonite Settlement (Zaporizhia Oblast, Ukraine)" http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/C4652.html (accessed January 4, 2013).
[62] *GAMEO*, s.v. "Chortitza Mennonite Settlement (Zaporizhia Oblast, Ukraine)" http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/C4652.html (accessed January 4, 2013).

Army. Caught between their country of heritage and their country of birth which were at war with each other, they returned home due to the German invasion but soon after the NKVD arrived to deport them to Siberia where they died.[63] At the young age of seven, Waldemar Koehn was an orphan due partly to the fact that his family was considered *Volksdeutsche*. Jacob Neufeld too was interned in 1933. While his memoir describes his experience in the Soviet gulag, 1,600 pages of government records also reveal his ordeal and the experience of other Mennonite men who were charged with siding with the Nazis and were therefore traitors to the Soviet Union. Before being sentenced to five years of hard labor, Neufeld was interrogated and tortured at the NKVD office. Although determined not to implicate any other German-Russians and believing himself to be innocent, he finally signed a confession and relegated himself to the gulag.[64]

Examining the contrast between ethnic Germans and Russians or Ukrainians reveals how ethnic Germans maintained their heritage through ethnic homogeneity, language, and religion in spite of the dwindling freedoms described in the paragraphs above. The Neufeld family for example lived northwest of Chortitza in one of the daughter colonies of the settlement. Times were very difficult for them as they were forced to relinquish nearly all of their food in order to meet the required quotas. Their sons attended Russian schools in the nearby cities of Zaporozhe and Stalingrad in order to have more opportunities available to them. Leaving their ethnic German village to attend school resulted in the sons' denial of the existence of God and rejection of their

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[63] Waldemar Koehn, *Memoirs,* 10.
[64] Jacob Neufeld, *Path of Thorns,* 39.

family's Mennonite faith. The presence of a Ukrainian midwife who arrived in their village to work at the local hospital highlighted other aspects of ethnic German culture. From the Neufelds' perspective, the Ukrainian woman was different because of her hygiene practices, her nice clothing and jewelry, and abundance of food.[65] There was also a language barrier that needed to be overcome in order to communicate with the midwife. Lastly, the midwife's marriage to the Neufeld's older son was not only a rare intermarriage between an ethnic German and a Ukrainian but was devoid of religious ceremony, something the German villagers found disturbing.[66]

The Friesen family lived in the ethnic German village of Einlage, part of the Chortitza settlement, where the father worked on a collective farm. After the NKVD arrested him, the family was banned from working on the collective because they were now enemies of the state. They also lost their home (which belonged to the collective) and their possessions inside of it. Illegally sheltered by several families during the middle of winter until they were forced out of the village, they moved in with relatives in Chortitza who worked at the Mennonite hospital. An aunt and uncle adopted one of the Friesen daughters in order for her to have enough to eat. Once their father returned in 1935, the family moved to Nikopol, a nearby Russian village. This abrupt change in culture was a difficult transition too. Not only did the children have to learn how to

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[65] Justina Neufeld, *A Family Torn Apart* (Kitchener, Ontario: Pandora Press, 2003), 79-80.
[66] Neufeld, *A Family Torn Apart* 81.

speak Russian at the all-Russian school, but restrictions on the practice of her family's Mennonite faith eventually led to the deportation and death of Edith's father.[67] Ethnic Germans, who wanted to avoid the fate of those deported, thought of ways in which they could escape capture and exile to Siberia. For instance, Lilly Zaft's father Rudolf Zaft traveled by train to various places, never staying in one area long enough to be noticed. Having dug a bunker for his family in their backyard, he included a secret compartment where he could hide to avoid detection when he was home. None of the children knew of his hiding place until Lilly overheard her parents talking in the darkness of the bunker. The bunker was large enough for his big family. Rudolf Zaft's first wife, by whom he had two children, had died in childbirth. Remarrying a local Adventist, his family had grown to include Lilly, Lydia, Valentine, and Renate. Also living with them was Rudolf Zaft's elderly mother-in-law and their three Russian servants.[68] The children by the age of three knew not to talk to strangers and especially not to speak German in public. Their parents had also instructed them not to mention their father to anyone, hoping that the NKVD (of whom there were Mennonite collaborators in town) would not realize he was still there. Ethnic Germans in Chortitza and the surrounding settlements learned how to live low-profile lives in order to avoid being noticed by the Soviet Union whose decisions to deport Germans living in Ukraine reflected their distrust toward them. And yet, the German population was not the only ethnic population targeted; Stalin's Russification plan extended to Tatars, Chechens,

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[67] Friesen, *Journey Into Freedom*, 55.
[68] Lilly Zaft, Interview by Author. Mercersburg, PA. Dec. 22, 2013.

Finns, and Koreans. Germans in the Soviet Union continued to have limited freedoms as the Soviet government increased control over their lives. The Soviet Union never doubted the identity of ethnic Germans; however, as they continued restricting freedoms of religion, language use, and cultural expression, they were pressuring them to conform in order to survive. Therefore, it was no wonder that ethnic Germans heralded the occupying German Army in 1941 as saviors from the hardships that they had experienced under the Soviet Union. To them, anything was better than the loss of their fathers and brothers to the NKVD and the death of their children by hunger.

CHAPTER III

REESTABLISHING GERMANNESS: THE GERMAN OCCUPATION OF CHORTITZA

In 1941 as German forces pushed east into Soviet territory, their blitzkrieg brought them into contact with ethnic German settlements in the Soviet Union. Termed Operation Barbarossa by the German Army, German soldiers quickly advanced through territory that a few days before had held Soviet-controlled villages and cities. Ethnic Germans were filled with dread as news of Germany's declaration of war reached them. Yet, through the fear of war between Germany and the Soviet Union emerged hope that life would improve with the German Army's occupation. Ethnic Germans and other minorities expected the Germans to be "saviors" and deliver them from the Soviet government. The lives of ethnic Germans before and after the German invasion showed how the presence of the German Army reinforced German identities; ethnic Germans now had the freedom to practice German culture. More importantly, however, life during occupation revealed how those who had convincing displays of Germanness benefited from the occupation.

Historiography

The German invasion and occupation is a complicated period in the study of ethnic German history. The first of the three historiographical frameworks, victimization narratives, focus on the period prior to occupation rather than 1941-1943, the years under German command. Atrocities committed toward ethnic Germans after Germany's invasion of the East in 1939 meld into accounts of ethnic German refugees fleeing

raping, looting, and terror in 1944.[69] Historian Samuel Sinner's work uses the 1941 deportation of ethnic Germans as proof that Stalin had always wanted to liquidate this population and now was able to use the war to accomplish his purposes.[70] There are problems with the sources that Sinner chooses to use to support his argument. While the Soviet Union had distrusted ethnic minorities for decades, if their purpose was to exterminate the population they would have done so earlier or more efficiently. Citing Robert Conquest and Benjamin Pinkus, Sinner tries to prove statistically that death and deportation is proof of an ethnic German genocide.[71] Only very briefly does Sinner address the German occupation of Ukraine; his language downplays the role of ethnic Germans as perpetrators in the Holocaust. For instance, he writes, "8,000 ethnic Germans *were put* into *Selbstschutz* protection groups by the Nazis…the *Selbstschutz had to* burn the bodies. They *had to* dig the mass graves" (emphasis mine).[72] Yet, Sinner does not discuss the reasons for ethnic German actions such as the desire to prove their Germanness. Instead, Sinner concludes that the Nazi invasion caused grief, the loss of ethnic German homes, and death for those with Jewish spouses instead of acknowledging the thousands of Jews killed by ethnic German collaborators.[73]

There are two reasons why victimization narratives do not focus geographically or chronologically on the German occupation of Ukraine. First, the German Army

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[69] Alfred-Maurice de Zayas, *A Terrible Revenge: The Ethnic Cleansing of the East European Germans* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).
[70] Samuel Sinner, "World War II: Deportation and *Trudarmiya* (Labor Army), 1941-1945 and Beyond" In *The Open Wound: The Genocide of German Ethnic Minorities in Russia and the Soviet Union* (Fargo, ND: University of North Dakota, 2000), 79.
[71] Sinner, *The Open Wound*, 84-85.
[72] Ibid., 89.
[73] Ibid.

treated ethnic Germans respectably. They were not taken out of their homes and shot, and they were given larger food allowances and more material possessions than their Ukrainian and Jewish neighbors.[74] Second, victimization narratives do not address the German occupation of Ukraine because it was during this period that ethnic Germans were the individuals killing, looting, and committing atrocities. Although some historians such as Sinner try to mold the narrative to make it appear that ethnic Germans were victims during occupation, an unbiased account of the situation reveals otherwise. All ethnic Germans were in some way complicit in killing Jews, regardless of coercion. Yet, many works focus on wrongs committed against ethnic Germans. Otto Pohl's work is situated within the early years of World War II; a focus on deportations prior to German occupation is more prevalent in his work although the book's chronology extends from 1937 to 1949.[75] Pohl also describes how ethnic Germans were victims of Nazi Germany's power and liquidation plans unless they collaborated.[76] Even Adam Giesinger chose to title his chapter on World War II in his classic and oft-cited work "Liquidation."[77] Once again, Giesinger's chapter only discusses ethnic German deportations by the Soviet Union in the early years of the war.

The German occupation is a predominant topic in institutional narratives, however. As the opposite of victimization narratives, institutional narratives blatantly

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[74] Being a *Volksdeutsche* in Smolensk included "special food packets, soap, clothes, and linens." Laurie R. Cohen, *Smolensk under the Nazis: Everyday Life in Occupied Russia* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2013), 87.
[75] Otto J. Pohl, "Germans" In *Ethnic Cleansing in the USSR, 1937-1949* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1999).
[76]Giesinger, *From Catherine to Khrushchev*, 303.
[77] Adam Giesinger, *From Catherine to Khrushchev* (Battleford, Saskatchewan: Marian Press, 1974).

point out that ethnic Germans accepted Jewish property, betrayed Jewish neighbors, and killed Jews as members of the *Selbstschutz* and *Sonderkommando R.* Eric Steinhart and Wendy Lower's works both show very clearly that ethnic Germans participated in the Holocaust as part of Nazi Germany's racial policies.[78] These racial goals not only consisted of killing Jews but using ethnic Germans as a bastion of Aryan purity. The presence of ethnic Germans in Ukraine provided the basis for the growth of a pure race to inhabit the area; plans were for the Aryan population to enlarge the Third Reich's territory. Yet, institutional narratives often paint ethnic Germans as one collective group when, in fact, not all ethnic Germans killed Jews or participated in the Holocaust in the same way. Instead of individualizing ethnic Germans, institutional narratives view their participation from the top down. For instance, the voices of ethnic Germans are largely silent during discussions of the *Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle* (*VoMi*), the ethnic German organization that was in charge of the ethnic German population and their resettlement.[79] Institutional narratives do not only focus on Nazi institutions. Pavel Polian uses an institutional approach to discuss the Soviet system behind ethnic German deportations.[80]

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[78] Wendy Lower, *Nazi Empire-Building and the Holocaust in Ukraine* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2005). Eric C. Steinhart, *The Holocaust and the Germanization of Ukraine* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
[79] Valdis O. Lumans, *Himmler's Auxiliaries* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1993). Robert Koehl, *RKFDV: German Resettlement Policy 1939-1945: A History of the Reich Commission for the Strengthening of Germandom* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957).
[80] Pavel Polian, *Against their Will: The History of Forced Migrations in the USSR* (New York: Central European Press, 2004), 134. J. Otto Pohl, "The Loss, Retention, and Reacquisition of Social Capital by Special Settlers in the USSR, 1941-1960. In *Migration, Homeland, and Belonging in Eurasia,* ed. Cynthia J. Buckley and Blair A. Ruble (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).

Alltagsgeschichte accounts focus on the everyday lives of ethnic Germans.[81] These narratives first discuss Soviet deportations before showing how the German invasion and occupation allowed ethnic Germans to reassemble their lives, reclaim their homes and farms, and return to pre-World War I prosperity. As opposed to institutional narratives, *Alltagsgeschichte* accounts reveal the complexities of the ethnic German experience that include differing attitudes towards Jews and Ukrainians, participation and nonparticipation in defense operations, and the welcoming of German troops. Yet, these accounts can also fail to provide appropriate context.

Before the German Invasion

The experiences of Chortitza Germans in the 1930s colored later interactions with the German and Soviet armies. The years leading up to World War II were especially difficult for ethnic Germans in Ukraine. The positive relationship ethnic Germans shared with their Russian and Ukrainian neighbors disintegrated after the 1917 Bolshevik revolution. Targeted as kulaks or wealthy farmers, Chortitza Germans experienced bandit attacks during the Russian Civil War. The beginning of the collective farm system in 1928 resulted in the loss of further property as well as privilege. The famine of 1931-1932 was followed by a typhoid epidemic, ravaging the malnourished population even as fathers, brothers, and sons were being deported by the Soviets. It is no surprise then that ethnic Germans (as well as some Ukrainians) believed that the

[81] Marlene Epp, *Women without Men* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999). Kate Brown, *A Biography of No Place: From Ethnic Borderland to Soviet Heartland* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

German Army's presence would improve living conditions for them and viewed them as "saviors" as did some ethnic Ukrainians.

The Soviet government, despite its claims of being an inclusive nation and amidst its Russification policies, still used nationality as an identifier on Soviet passports. The Soviet Union clearly identified the Chortitza population as ethnic German, as those in Chortitza also identified themselves as ethnic Germans. There were precedents for Soviet action toward ethnic Germans during World War II. In the 1930s NKVD officers had targeted ethnic Germans as subversives and during World War I the Soviet Union deported ethnic Germans living in border regions. The German invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941 set into motion a series of events that included the evacuation of ethnic Germans eastward.[82] The hope that ethnic Germans experienced with the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Agreement faded into fear. An ethnic German described the situation like this: "The terrible war with Germany began, and we were in bad trouble. We were often shouted at and accused of anticipating the arrival of the German army."[83] The projected treatment of ethnic Germans now that the two countries were at war was troubling based on prior Soviet treatment before hostilities with German began. Knowledge of the outbreak of war encouraged other ethnic Germans though. "There was a rumor that we could flee to Germany, but that was said in secret" one ethnic German remembered. "Tante Susie started to sew so that we would

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[82] Ingeborg Fleischhauer, "'Operation Barbarossa' and the Deportation." In *The Soviet Germans Past and Present* by Ingeborg Fleischhauer and Benjamin Pinkus (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 66.
[83] Susanna Toews, *Trek to Freedom: The Escape of Two Sisters from South Russia during World War II* (Winkler, Manitoba: Heritage Publications, 1976), 17.

have some underwear to wear in Germany," recalled one ethnic German girl; the novelty of preparing for this anticipated occasion remained ingrained in her memory.[84]

Soviet evacuations in 1941 prior to the German invasion were preventive measures for national security. Otto J. Pohl and Eric J. Schmaltz state that it was the Soviets' intention to move the entire ethnic German population that resided within the reach of the German Army.[85] Another large component of the evacuations consisted of transporting by train factory equipment, farm machinery, and anything of use away from the German Army. A third reason, however minor, for evacuation was the desire to maintain the ethnic German population as a work force. In their evacuation plans, the Soviets planned to transport able-bodied men followed by women to be used for labor; only after this would the Soviets remove the elderly and young.[86] While the Soviet evacuation plans were not fully realized, 800,000 ethnic Germans were taken from their homes by 1941.[87]

That the Soviet authorities termed the removal process of ethnic Germans an "evacuation" shows that they viewed ethnic Germans as part of their population.[88] The identity of ethnic Germans in Ukraine at this time was tenuous. While the German

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[84] Friesen, *Journey into Freedom*, 79.
[85] J. Otto Pohl, Eric J. Schmaltz, and Ronald J. Vossler, "'In Our Hearts We Felt the Sentence of Death': Ethnic German Recollections of Mass Violence in the USSR, 1928–48." *Journal of Genocide Research* 11, no. 2-3 (June to Sept. 2009): 324.
[86] Ingeborg Fleischhauer and Benjamin Pinkus, *The Soviet Germans Past and Present* (NY: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 72-73.
[87] M. Kalinin and A. Gorkin, "Decree of the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet 'On the Resettlement of Germans Residing in the Volga Region' (August 28, 1941)." Translated and Edited by Eric J. Schmaltz, *Istoriia rossiiskikh nemtsev v dokumentakh,* (Moscow: MIGUP, 1993). Alexander Dallin, *German Rule in Russia, 1941-1945* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1981), 289.
[88] Rebecca Manley, "The Perils of Displacement: The Soviet Evacuee between Refugee and Deportee" *Central European History* 16, no. 4 (Nov. 2007): 507.

invasion ensured that their identity as ethnic Germans would once again dominate, during the repression of the 1930s, key pillars of family, religion, and language had been shaken. School children in the late 1930s were encouraged to wear a red scarf representing their support of Communism. Grappling with the idea of supporting an ideology that denounced the existence of God, Edith Friesen, an ethnic German girl stated, "Oh to be a chameleon - changeable, flexible, unremarkable, no different from the others. There was a physical safety in blending into the sea of red scarves. And behind the red scarf lay the unseen inner world - wild and free."[89] Fear of not fitting in would continue during the German occupation; instead of blending into Soviet society, ethnic Germans would strive to be good enough Aryan Germans.

After the German Army's invasion of the Soviet Union, the Soviets began to evacuate ethnic Germans not only from the border regions but anywhere in the path of the approaching army. The best example of Soviet-ethnic German interaction at this time is the case of the Volga Germans. "A decree by the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet" in August 1941 stated that it was "necessary to transfer the whole of the German population living in the Volga area into other areas" because there were "thousands and tens of thousands of diversionists and spies, who on a signal being given from Germany are to carry out sabotage in the area inhabited by the Germans of the Volga."[90] While grossly inaccurate, this shows the extent to which the Soviet Union desired to follow through with their national security concerns. In 1941 the Soviet government also began

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[89] Friesen, *Journey into Freedom,* 79.
[90] Giesinger, *From Catherine to Khrushchev*, 305.

to interrupt routine life Chortitza. Marlene Epp describes the rise in Soviet deportations as able-bodied individuals were sent to dig ditches for defense or were required to join the *trudarmee.*[91] The Friesen family, previously living in the Chortitza town of Einlage, had moved to a Russian village in order for Mr. Friesen to find a job after he had served time in a labor camp. As the war waged between Soviet and German forces, the family saw more and more ethnic Germans in the bread lines each day waiting for their ration of food. The family, however, did not talk with them or speak in German; rather, they pretended to be Russian in order to prevent being identified as one who was not as worthy to receive food rations.[92]

The speedy movement of the German Army prevented the deportation of all Chortitza villagers, however. The Red Army tried to evacuate Chortitza from August 16 through 20, 1941.[93] This evacuation attempt was not entirely successful from the perspective of the Soviets. Ethnic German families like the Zafts had spent the previous days hidden in their bunker from battles and evacuation orders. As wagons, livestock, military equipment, and soldiers clogged the roads, traffic slowed substantially when crossing the Dnieper Bridge.[94] There were instances of ethnic German families deliberately prolonging their flight by having "accidents" or breaking wagon wheels.[95] The closeness of the German Army resulted in civilian deaths as evacuees were either

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[91] Epp, *Women without Men,* 26-27. Connie Braun, *The Steppes are the Colour of Sepia: A Mennonite Memoir* (Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2008), 100.
[92] Friesen, *Journey into Freedom.*
[93] Epp, *Women without Men,* 27.
[94] A.J. Kroeker, *First Mennonite Villages in Russia 1789-1943* (Cloverdale, B.C.: D.W. Friesen & Sons, 1981), 233.
[95] Epp, *Women without Men*

caught in the crossfire or died when the Soviets exploded the hydroelectric dam and bridge that stretched across the Dnieper.

Other ethnic German towns on the east side of the Dnieper River were also ordered to evacuate. All residents (about 6,000 ethnic Germans) of the ethnic German Molotschna settlement sixty miles southeast of Chortitza were ordered to assemble at the Stulnevo train station with whatever belongings they could carry. Soviet plans to evacuate these thousands of villagers by train failed, however, as German planes flew overhead. Ethnic German residents remained in the field next to the railroad tracks for several days until German troops ordered them to return to their homes that had meanwhile been ransacked by Romanian soldiers.[96] A similar instance occurred in the ethnic German village of Waldheim where ethnic German Waldemar Koehn and his grandmother assembled at their local train station for evacuation. When the Soviets realized that evacuation was impossible, however, they prepared to kill the inhabitants rather than allow them to become potential collaborators with the German Army. Nevertheless, German aircraft destroyed the Soviet machine gun positions at the last possible moment saving Waldemar and the other ethnic Germans there.[97] Still other ethnic German settlements were completely removed by the Soviet soldiers before the German *Wehrmacht* arrived. Some areas further east had "'German villages in which all life had been extinguished.'"[98]

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[96] Jacob Neufeld, *Path of Thorns: Soviet Mennonite Life under Communist and Nazi Rule* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 211-215.
[97] Waldemar Koehn, *Memoir* (n.p.), 10-11.
[98] Ingeborg Fleischhauer, "'Operation Barbarossa' and the Deportation." In *The Soviet Germans Past and Present* by Ingeborg Fleischhauer and Benjamin Pinkus (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 71.

Why, though, did most ethnic Germans not want to move away from the enemy, the German Army? In actuality, Chortitza Germans hoped that life under German control would be better. Chortitzans had experienced life as ethnic Germans living in the Soviet Union. The few family members who had returned from Siberia and the *trudarmee* were a testament to the hard labor, meager food, and inadequate shelter awaiting those who left their villages during evacuations. While ethnic Germans were unsure of how they would be treated by the German Army, the ability to identify as fully ethnic German and the possibility of escape from a life of poverty and fear gave them courage to remain hidden in their bunkers until the Soviet Army had left and the German Army arrived.

Yet it was precisely this fluid identity of being both ethnic German and Soviet that caused uncertainty and fear among Chortitza ethnic Germans as they awaited contact with the German Army on August 17, 1941. For example, the Zaft family of Chortitza were ethnically German yet had lived in the Soviet Union for several generations. The head of the family, Rudolf Zaft, was a photographer. His daughter Lilly, born in Chortitza in 1936, still remembers the all-night prayer vigil held in her home during the German invasion, the bombing of her area during battles, her family's many hours spent in their backyard bunker, and the sighting of the first German scouts. Rudolf Zaft was convinced that the German invasion would turn out positively for them. Zaft believed that the German Army would treat the ethnic German population of Chortitza and the surrounding towns much better than the Soviets had; in addition under German occupation, ethnic Germans would no longer need to fear deportation eastward. The ethnic German Mennonite men from Chortitza, who had surreptitiously gathered at

the Zaft house, were not as sure. Indeed their uncertain feelings were representative of other ethnic Germans during the invasion who exhibited confusion and alarm as they tried to decide how to act toward the German Army.

After the Soviet Retreat

The afternoon after the Soviet retreat, Lilly Zaft's encounter with three German scouts dressed in civilian clothes helps explain the importance of identity for ethnic Germans. Upon seeing Lilly, the scouts expressed surprise that there were inhabitants in Chortitza, having thought that the Soviet evacuation was complete. Lilly Zaft's reply in German that individuals still remained in Chortitza went against her parents' instructions to remain silent. The scouts' disbelief that someone spoke German, however, convinced her listening parents that these men were part of the German Army. Ethnic Germans were often cautious at first, not wanting to show any reaction toward the presence of German soldiers for fear that the men were actually Russians in disguise. For instance, in another ethnic German town, only when villagers saw the phrase "Gott mit uns" on the soldiers' belts were they assured that these men were truly German soldiers and welcomed them.[99]

The presence of German soldiers changed the dynamics of ethnic German villages like Chortitza. While a few days earlier, these ethnic Germans would have denied that they spoke German, now the Zafts gladly hosted the officers and supplied them with information regarding the terrain and the German population in the area.

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[99] Maria Kreiser, *Though my Soul more Bent: Memoir of a Soviet German* (Bismarck, ND: Germans from Russia Heritage Society, 2003), 37.

Admitting one knew German could have meant the difference between life and death depending on which army was present. During the German occupation, failure to aid the German Army would also have made the inhabitants appear disloyal or non German.[100] The Chortitza villages "welcomed the German soldiers enthusiastically."[101] The Chortitza Germans and their Ukrainian neighbors greeted the German Army with displays of hospitality including offering the traditional Ukrainian bread and salt. Neufeld's language concerning the German soldiers after their arrival was in flattering terms: "our rescuing angels" and "they greeted us as friends." In his writings, he even used "glimmered" to describe the connections they now had with Germany.[102] The distinction between ethnic German life in the Soviet Union and the way ethnic Germans practiced religion, language, and culture during the German occupation (1941-1943) demonstrates how German culture had been repressed. These differences also show how villagers in Chortitza and other ethnic German towns naturally identified as ethnic German.

Religion

Prior to the German occupation of Ukraine, the practice of religion was forbidden. Marriages were not conducted in churches nor were pastors able to officiate. Instead, couples paid a few rubles to obtain a marriage certificate from a government office. Parents were also forbidden to openly teach their children about God, read the

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[100] Doris Bergen, "The Nazi Concept of 'Volksdeutsche' and the Exacerbation of Anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe, 1939-45" *Journal of Contemporary History* 29 (1994): 574.
[101] Fleischhauer and Pinkus, *The Soviet Germans Past and Present*, 73, note 24. Hans Werner, *Imagined Homes: Soviet German Immigrants in Two Cities* (Winnepeg, Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 2007), 29.
[102] Neufeld, *Path of Thorns,* 218.

Bible to them, or pray with them. In spite of this, many devout Mennonites secretly imparted their religious beliefs to their children; children were able to recite German-language prayers years later.[103] Naturally, there were no open church meetings, and church buildings were converted into offices, theaters, or storage places.

In 1941, however, not only were ethnic Germans free to openly welcome the soldiers they had been waiting for, but they could now engage in limited religious practices. Even though Mennonite pastors from Chortitza had been deported by the Soviets earlier, villagers participated in religious services. The lack of men did not halt sermons from being preached each Sunday in the Chortitza Mennonite church. Epp describes women reading the sermons in lieu of a preacher while Neufeld recounts the blessings they received from the visits of a neighboring village's pastor.[104] As a Seventh-day Adventist minister, Rudolf Zaft secretly baptized a number of individuals in the Dnieper River in 1942 after villagers had been forbidden to participate in this religious practice for decades. While baptisms were still frowned upon by the occupying German Army (and therefore why Zaft performed the ritual in secret), church members would never have participated in an open religious act like this during Soviet times.[105]

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[103] "Lidia Davydovna Tzernikel, "The Moldovan Diaries" http://www.themoldovandiaries.com/diary/lidia-davydovna-tzernikel/ (accessed Dec. 10, 2015).
[104] Epp, *Women without Men.* Neufeld, *Path of Thorns,* 228.
[105] Mennonite Library and Archives, "Chortitza Oak" http://mla.bethelks.edu/metadata/numphot.php (accessed Oct. 12, 2015). Rudolph Zaft. Photograph Collection. Dnieper River Baptism, 1942. Lilly Zaft, Interview with Author, Mercersburg, PA. Jan. 4, 2016. The Seventh-day Adventist Church was first present in Ukraine in the late 1800s through the work of colporteurs and tracts sent from relatives in Germany and America.

Language

For ethnic Germans, it was important to teach one's child German not only because the majority of ethnic German villagers knew German but in order to preserve their heritage. After the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 and collectivization in 1928, knowledge of Russian became important. Children began to be instructed in Russian in school even though many villagers still only spoke German. During the German occupation, the German language was revived. Streets in occupied cities were granted German names.[106] As schools were reopened and the German language reinstated, parents were glad that their children did not have to study under Russian teachers or learn the Russian language any longer.[107] Naturally, communication with the occupying army was uncomplicated, and those who did have knowledge of Russian were used as translators in government offices or in the German Army's ranks.

Chortitza Germans were thankful for the opportunity to send their children to German-language schools that were free from Soviet indoctrination. Schooling during the German occupation was used, however, as an opportunity to indoctrinate children with Nazi ideology. In kindergarten, Lilly Zaft was taught that children with blond hair and blue eyes were favored when an Aryan classmate was chosen to recite a poem during a special program for a visiting German general. Although Lilly ended up reciting the poem when the blond-haired kindergartener got stage fright, she realized that her

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[106] Laurie R. Cohen, *Smolensk under the Nazis: Everyday Life in Occupied Russia* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2014), 61.
[107] Lilly Zaft. Interview with Author. Mercersburg, PA. Dec. 13, 2013.

dark hair automatically made her less favored. Yet even as she was discriminated against, Lilly began to view others in the same manner.

> One day when I came home from school I was all fired up from all the propaganda we got in 2nd grade, which I had just entered, that we all are the only smart, highly evolved and educated the most developed etc. of all the people in the world…Well I repeated all this and most likely with childish enthusiasm… My father ordered me into his room and when I was there I was told to sit on the footstool. That was usually done to make me think of what I had done bad or wrong and I just couldn't think of anything. I was surprised when my Dad got this children's book: *Gockel Haenchens Abenteuer*, which means: [*The Young*] *Rooster's Adventures*.[108] My dad made me read the book and afterwards I had to read in the Bible the story of Jesus' birth and the section where the Wise men came to see Jesus and bring him presents… Then my Dad made it clear to me that there are all kinds of other people in the world… [This book] opened my mind so much to look at people different that I didn't want to ever forget it [each time we fled].[109]

For other children, learning about Nazi propaganda further justified the actions of their parents who complied with the Nazis and began to form a worldview where they were the masters of racially inferior peoples.

Being identified by the *VoMi* as ethnic Germans resulted in a changed life for those in Chortitza and the surrounding colonies. The Nazis in turn used ethnic Germans as justification for invading the Soviet Union, citing the need to rescue ethnic Germans from their Soviet tormentors. In addition, Nazi Germany now had a population willing to do anything in order to be identified with the victors - a population of ethnic Germans able to build their Aryan empire and help murder Jews and other *Untermenschen.* While participating in the German Army's plans were not cultural expressions of their German

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[108] The book details the adventures of the a rooster to different parts of the world, particularly to Africa.
[109] Lilly Zaft, Letter to Author, Aug. 12, 2012.

identity like religion and language, complicity in the Holocaust was the result of ethnic Germans' desire to prove that they were German.

Complicity

Accounts of ethnic German involvement within Mennonite communities in Ukraine are strangely quiet. Historian Marlene Epp suggests that it is possible that some were unaware of the German Army's true intentions as many Jewish villages were evacuated prior to German occupation and German villagers were unfamiliar with Hitler's policies. Other accounts, however, point out that ethnic Germans did in fact know what was going on and therefore knowingly were perpetrators.[110] Still others argue that only the blind and deaf could plead ignorance to the shootings in the forest, the distribution of clothing and household goods, and the disappearance of their Jewish neighbors.[111]

The religious identity of Mennonite ethnic Germans was often challenged by the changes that came with the German invasion and the efforts put forth to prove one's loyalty to the Third Reich. The *Selbstschutz* or Self-Defense Unit was one such example. German forces in World War I had introduced ethnic Germans in Chortitza to the concept of the *Selbstschutz.* Before the occupying German forces left the area, they had offered to train and equip men who could protect the Chortitza and Molotschna villages from the Red Army and marauders. The debate that took place at the beginning of the twentieth century within the Mennonite community over whether pacifists should arm

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[110] Epp, *Women without Men,* 35.
[111] Braun, *The Steppes are the Colour of Sepia,* 109, 110.

themselves resulted in not only support for the *Selbstschutz* but made Chortitza a target for the Red Army. Twenty-five years later, the German Army once again organized a self-defense group to protect against partisan attacks, help with anti-Jewish operations, and provide protection and guidance in 1943 during evacuation. To claim that all Mennonites turned against their pacifist beliefs would be both unfair and untrue. Many, however, were excited about having the military means to fight against the oppression they had experienced under the Soviet Union. Having authority and viewing oneself as better than others provided the ethnic Germans with a feeling of power. This included turning in Ukrainian and Mennonite individuals who had previously been NKVD officers and had placed men in prison or deported them to Siberia. Now there were opportunities to take revenge against the Soviet informers who had sent their family members to Soviet gulags after arresting and interrogating them.[112]

Chortitza ethnic German Rudolf Varesko remembered that many Mennonite boys signed up for service in the German Army. One of his neighbors, only a boy of sixteen, insisted on being placed on the front lines in order to avenge his father's deportation to Siberia.[113] Yet, unless revenge was specifically stated as the reason for signing up, one must remember that many ethnic Germans felt that they had no other choice but to participate in the Nazi cause. Indeed later, upon resettlement in the Reich and after gaining German citizenship, many men joined the *Wehrmacht* and *SS*.[114] For instance,

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[112] Eric Steinhart, *The Holocaust and the Germanization of the Ukraine,* 34.
[113] Rudolf Varesko, Interview by Author. Hagerstown, MD. Dec. 12, 2013. Unfortunately, the sixteen year-old was killed in battle soon after.
[114] John C. Swanson, *The Second World War and its Aftermath* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2008), 354, 354.

Karl Konrad, an ethnic German from Chortitza, stated that although he was too young to be drafted, his father joined the German Army where his knowledge of both German and Russian proved useful.[115] Participation in the *Wehrmacht* was not limited to the Chortitza settlement. In Romania, 75,000 ethnic Germans joined both the *Wehrmacht* and the *Waffen S.S.*[116] Approximately 120,000 ethnic Germans living in Hungary signed up.[117]

Ethnic Germans used their participation in the Holocaust to cement their German identity. Historian Doris Bergen connects anti-Semitism and the ensuing benefits for ethnic German very clearly. She argues that there were incentives to being identified as ethnic German because one received everything from homes to farm equipment to clothing that had originally belonged to the Jewish population or had been confiscated during collectivization. In fact, non-ethnic Germans also wanted to enjoy the benefits, leading Ukrainians and Poles to declare themselves as ethnic Germans. The looseness of what constituted an ethnic German not only allowed for this but helped exacerbate the Holocaust.[118] Ethnic Germans who accepted Jewish belongings ingratiated themselves into supporting Nazism. If the Third Reich were to fail, all that they had gained from the occupation and their involvement would disappear, including their position as the master race. Therefore, ethnic Germans ensured that they did all in their power to help Nazi Germany succeed.

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[115] Karl Konrad, Email to Author. Feb. 12, 2014.
[116] Swanson, *The Second World War and its Aftermath*, 352.
[117] Ibid., 350.
[118] Doris Bergen, "The Nazi Concept of 'Volksdetusche' and the Exacerbation of Anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe, 1939-45" *Journal of Contemporary History* 29, 571, 572.

Participation in the Holocaust was simple especially when Nazis labeled activities of racial cleansing as fights against Bolshevism and not anti-Semitic activities. (Ethnic Germans living in the Chortitza settlement did not historically hold anti-Semitic feelings nor, during the occupation, did they view all Jews as being connected to Bolshevism.)[119] For the Chortitza Mennonites, involvement ranged from murder to interceding on behalf of their Jewish neighbors and friends.[120] Yet, most if not all knew of the Nazi killings and still did not forcefully resist these actions. One ethnic German receiving clothes from Jews wrote, "'…at the time we received the clothing, we thought that the Germans were doing their best to take care of us.'" Although knowledge of where the items had come from made the recipient feel uncomfortable, she still accepted them and used them.[121]

There were ethnic Germans whose military service was used explicitly for the murder of Jews. Some ethnic Germans joined *S.S.*-organized police units responsible for the deaths of 70,000 to 90,000 Jews and other "undesirables" in Ukraine.[122] In hindsight, ethnic Germans remembered Jews fleeing through their villages when the German Army first invaded the Soviet Union. Mennonite Jacob Neufeld stated that while the Jews had believed the stories of German atrocities that they had all heard, ethnic German Mennonites refused to believe that the anti-Semitic feelings were true.[123]

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[119] Steinhart, *The Holocaust and the Germanization of Ukraine,* 223.
[120] Epp, *Women without Men* 35.
[121] Ibid.
[122] Pohl, Schmaltz, and Vossler, "'In Our Hearts We Felt the Sentence of Death': Ethnic German Recollections of Mass Violence in the USSR, 1928–48," 328.
[123] Neufeld, *Path of Thorns* 208.

Conclusion

Ethnic Germans always had a choice in how they reacted to the events unfolding around themselves. As "chameleons" or "amphibians," however, their fluid identity that took advantage of the present goaded them toward embracing their identity as ethnic Germans.[124] If those in Chortitza decided not to cooperate with Nazi Germany then their loyalty would come into question. This way of thinking was a motivating factor for participation in Nazi racial plans. Indeed, the best way that Chortitzans could display their cooperation with the German Army was to participate in military and racial activities because their status and existence rested upon the directives of the Nazis.[125]

Complicity with the Nazis had lasting results. Ethnic Germans had aided the German Army in racial cleansing, as beneficiaries and facilitators and sometimes as killers. Many ethnic Germans worked for the German Army or the *Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle* in administrative capacities. Others from Chortitza such as Rudolf Zaft provided information to the German Army, and individuals like Karl Konrad's father joined the German forces. While the very fact that the ethnic Germans did not flee ahead of the German invasion made them traitors to the USSR, their collaboration in a range of capacities was held against them by the Soviet Union. Before the German occupation, praying, saving religious objects from a church about to be destroyed, being responsible for the death of a cow on a collective farm, and bearing letters from a relative in Germany or America would have resulted in deportation or other punishment. Ethnic

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[124] Chad Bryant, *Prague in Black: Nazi Rule and Czech Nationalism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007).
[125] Steinhart, *The Holocaust and the Germanization of Ukraine* 37.

Germans' open support of the German war effort, however, would have resulted in even more severe punishment by the Soviets. Ethnic Germans knew that they had no future in the Soviet Union if Germany lost the war.

The years of the German occupation, 1941 to 1943, were not only opportunities to aid the Third Reich but a time of declaration of ethnic German identity. As ethnic Germans willingly helped the German Army, they reinforced their ethnic German identity. While those in Chortitza had held onto their ethnic identity, there were now new opportunities through religion, language, and culture to revitalize their ethnicity and reinforce their ties to Germany. The German occupation enabled them to express their identity while encouraging the adoption of Nazi ideology.

CHAPTER IV

RETURNED TO THE REICH

The year 1941 had been a year of victories for the German Army during their invasion of the Soviet Union. Germany's fortunes changed dramatically, however, in 1943 with the Battle of Stalingrad. After fighting against the cold and the Red Army for months, the German forces began to retreat. When the German Army realized that they would not be able to hold a defensive position along the Dnieper, the world of the Chortitza Germans was irrevocably altered as the German government decided to remove ethnic Germans from their villages. Ethnic Germans had enjoyed a respite during 1941 and 1942 from Soviet interference through deportations and work assignments. Now, in 1943, plans for resettling ethnic Germans were dusted off even though the Reich had still not granted them citizenship or fully trusted them as Germans. Resettlement was therefore another opportunity for ethnic Germans, who would be returning to the Reich as *Volksdeutsche*, to solidify their Germanness amidst the malleability of Nazi racial identity. This chapter argues that although the *Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle* (*VoMi*) initially identified the Chortitzans as ethnic Germans, resettlement brought their Germanness into question; having to once again convincingly portray themselves as ethnic Germans reveals how they navigated unpredictable and inconsistent Nazi racial criteria. This chapter shows how an ethnic group struggled to fulfill the state's expectations of a German identity in order to escape dire consequences during and after resettlement.

Historiography

The study of ethnic German resettlement plays directly into the three frameworks that comprise the historiography of ethnic Germans, both exposing gaps that this chapter fills as well as providing a lens through which writings on resettlement should be appropriately understood. Resettlement accounts that are part of the victimization narrative emphasize the Great Trek and not the resettlement of ethnic Germans by train.[126] These works argue that ethnic Germans had no choice but to leave with the German Army and that they did so quite unwillingly. They also portray the difficulties of the journey - the lack of food, warmth, shelter, and support from the *VoMi.* Lastly, secondary sources portray the experience of "returning" to the Reich as proof of their victimization which included everything from delousing to being housed in camps with barbed-wire fences. While this chapter's aim is not to diminish the experiences of ethnic Germans or gloss over the difficulties they experienced, recognizing whether or not a work is a victimization narrative helps place it in its proper context.

Victimization narratives also leave out much of the ethnic German resettlement experience. For instance, they often fail to explain to the reader that the ethnic German population viewed the German Army as saviors in 1941 and had been waiting for an opportunity to leave the Soviet Union. Resettlement, in fact, saved many ethnic Germans from deportation by the Soviet Union to labor camps. Victimization narratives also fail

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[126] Alfred de Zayas, *A Terrible Revenge: The Ethnic Cleansing of the East European Germans* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); John Philipps, *The Tragedy of the Soviet Germans: A Story of Survival* (n.p., 1983)*;* Samuel Sinner, *The Open Wound: The Genocide of German Ethnic Minorities in Russia and the Soviet Union, 1915-1949, and Beyond* (Fargo, ND: Germans from Russia Heritage Collection, North Dakota State University Libraries, 2000); James W. Long, *From Privileged to Dispossessed*: *The Volga Germans, 1860-1917* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988).

to compare the experiences of ethnic Germans to other groups such as Jews or Ukrainians, for this would show how ethnic Germans were treated better than those groups were. Lastly, accounts concerning the constraints of resettlement camps often do not point out that the ethnic Germans were offered farms previously occupied by Poles and Jews. Secondary works on resettlement that contribute to the literature posing ethnic Germans as victims continue to view ethnic Germans in isolation and not within the larger context of World War II.

Institutional narratives are just as prevalent among portrayals of ethnic German resettlement experiences.[127] Works on the *Reichskommissar für die Festigung deutschen Volkstums* (Reich Commission for the Strengthening of Germandom), *VoMi*, and *SS* demonstrate the power and influence of organizations that resulted in large population movements including uprooting ethnic Germans in Ukraine and resettling them in Poland and West Prussia. Institutional narratives show the masterminds (*SS* leaders Heinrich Himmler and Horst Hoffmeyer) behind these decisions as well as revealing the policies and racial goals that drove resettlement. Most notably, they clearly expose ethnic German complicity in the Holocaust by situating ethnic Germans not within their "isolated" ethnic German villages but within the Soviet Union and Germany. Timothy

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[127] Eric C. Steinhart, *The Holocaust and the Germanization of Ukraine* (New York: Cambridge University, 2015); Wendy Lower, *Nazi Empire-Building in Ukraine* (Chapel Hill: University of Carolina Press, 2005); Valdis O. Lumans, *Himmler's Auxiliaries* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993). Robert Koehl, *RKFDV: German Resettlement and Population Policy, 1939-1945: A History of the Reich Commission for the Strengthening of Germandom* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957). Ingeborg Fleischhauer, and Benjamin Pinkus, *The Soviet Germans Past and Present* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986).

Snyder's well-received work is a specific example of what can be accomplished when viewing the ethnic German experience through a wide lens.[128]

Yet, works written from an institutional perspective often clump ethnic Germans together as one homogeneous group, as seen in Eric Steinhart's book. They also fail to view resettlement from the perspective of the resettlers or engage in a debate over whether in fact they were appropriately termed resettlers when some ethnic Germans claimed they were refugees. Lastly, the geographical focus of these works is primarily situated in Ukraine; expansion to include research on the *VoMi's* role in Germany specifically regarding the resettlement camp system is needed.

Next, ethnic German resettlement has been portrayed through the lens of *Alltagsgeschichte* or the history of everyday life.[129] These works focus on resettlement at the ground level showing that ethnic Germans did not all act in the same way. They did not all want to be resettled nor did they all want to remain in their ethnic German villages. These works point out that not all ethnic Germans were evacuated by wagon back to the Reich; some traveled by train in a relatively short amount of time. Literature from an *Alltagsgeschichte* point of view shows that not all ethnic Germans remained in resettlement camps from 1943 to 1945 nor did they all accept resettlement on Polish farms. Nevertheless, this facet of ethnic German historiography needs to be better developed. Greater attention needs to be given to the experiences of those who traveled

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[128] Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2005).
[129] Alf Lüdtke, *The History of Everyday Life: Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995); Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998); Marlene Epp, *Women without Men* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999). Hans Werner, *Imagined Homes: Soviet German Immigrants in Two Cities* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 2007).

by train as well as the reactions of ethnic Germans when they heard of plans for their evacuation in 1943. More research also needs to be done on camp life as well as life on Polish farms. My research, therefore, is able to evade many of the shortcomings of these three frameworks by viewing Chortitza as a case study. It is not only able to fill in some of the above-mentioned gaps that these three other frameworks lack or interpret incorrectly, but it enables the individualization of the many ethnic Germans that history has forgotten.

While there are few works that specifically show the presence of the state dictating the identity of its subjects, Jeremy King's work traces the history of Budweis, a town comprised of Germans and Czechs in present-day Czechoslovakia.[130] In 1918 when Czechoslovakia was formed, Germans living there were not required to change their nationality. After the annexation of Czechoslovakia by Nazi Germany however, many Czechs attempted to become recognized as Germans.[131] King argues that the formation of the hybrid *Budweiser* as equally Czech and German, whose nationality was defined by language, enabled the inhabitants of Budweis to weather the storms of shifting loyalties and identities during the first half of the twentieth century.[132] Historian Chad Bryant's similar work, an outgrowth of King's study, shows the Nazis

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[130] For information on the Nazi's interactions with others based on their racial policies see: John Connelly, "Nazis and Slavs: From Racial Theory to Racist Practice" *Central European History* 32, no. 1: 1-33. For other examples geographically and chronologically removed see: Shira Robinson, *Citizen Strangers: Palestinians and the Birth of Israel's Liberal Settler State* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013). Hillel Cohen, *Good Arabs: The Israeli Security Agencies and the Israeli Arabs, 1948-1967* (University of California Press, 2011). Jeremy King, *Budweisers into Czechs and Germans: A Local History of Bohemian Politics, 1848-1948* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).
[131] Ibid., 184.
[132] Ibid., 2.

institutionalizing racial identities for the practical purpose of gaining control over the Sudetenland.[133] Bryant describes the struggle of Czechs who were compelled to fulfill Nazi expectations of what their identity as "good Germans" should be. Hugo Service's work, on the other hand, shows how the Polish government encouraged Germans to become Poles during the expulsions that took place following World War II.[134] This thesis contributes to the study of state-encouraged identity through the case study of the Chortitza Germans.

The German Experience

At the beginning of the war, the presence of the Chortitza Germans and others deemed German in Ukraine had fit perfectly with Nazi plans for racial development. Because ethnic Germans in the Soviet Union could be identified as Germans, they were considered a convenient base for spreading German culture, influence, and racial ideology. They would act as a racial vanguard in the East. Aryanization happened concurrently with the Nazi murder of Jews and other groups the Nazis deemed unfit to live in the Aryan Reich.[135] These plans had begun to come to fruition during the German occupation of Ukraine with the help of extensive ethnic German collaboration in 1941 and 1942.

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[133] Chad Bryant, *Prague in Black: Nazi Rule and Czech Nationalism* (Harvard, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2009).
[134] Hugo Service, *Germans to Poles: Communism, Nationalism and Ethnic Cleansing after the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
[135] The definition of "Germanness" can be rather vague. As described in this chapter, however, Nazi officials determined one's Germanness based on genealogy, primary language spoken at home, and "racial" features as revealed through physical characteristics.

Himmler and *VoMi* officials realized their plans for Ukraine and Russia would have to be altered due to the Soviet advance in 1943. Ethnic German Mennonite Jacob Neufeld stated that the German government, like the Soviets in 1941, had an evacuation plan ready.[136] Heinrich Himmler, head of the *SS* and director of the resettlement camp network, had overseen the resettlement of ethnic Germans in 1938 and 1939. Horst Hoffmeyer, a Nazi *SS* official, had been charged by Himmler with resettling ethnic Germans from Volhynia and Galicia during the winter of 1939 and the spring of 1940.[137] Hoffmeyer continued to head the *VoMi* until the end of the war and would be in charge of resettling ethnic Germans from Chortitza and elsewhere in Ukraine.

Chortitzans were familiar with evacuation. In 1941 the Soviet Union had moved the ethnic German population east of the Dnieper out of the reach of the German Army. The deportees included the Black Sea Germans, the Volga Germans, and other large ethnic German colonies.[138] Molotschna, the settlement east of Chortitza, was located on the left bank of the Dnieper. Its inhabitants were to be deported; as Soviet soldiers herded the townspeople to the train station, German paratroopers and aircraft arrived forcing the Soviet forces to leave. Now, two years later, the German Army was moving

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[136] Jacob A. Neufeld, *Path of Thorns: Soviet Mennonite Life under Communist and Nazi Rule* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2014), 235. Neufeld's diary published with his memoir in *Path of Thorns* will be referenced often. Although Neufeld was not a native of Chortitza, he lived in the neighboring German settlement of Molotschna. Not only is he one of the few ethnic Germans from Ukraine who kept a diary during resettlement, but he experienced Soviet repression firsthand after being accused of conspiring with Germany against the Soviet Union. Sentenced to five years of hard labor, he survived and returned home to face more years of repression before the German occupation. His wife was repeatedly ordered to the Soviet front to dig ditches, his son was conscripted into the Soviet Army, and his time in the Soviet gulag had physically crippled him.

[137] Michael Burleigh, *Germany Turns Eastwards: A Study of Ostforschung in the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 186.

[138] Adam Giesinger, *From Catherine to Krushchev* (Battleford, Saskatchewan: Marian Press, 1974), 307.

the ethnic German population of Ukraine west out of the grasp of the Soviet Army.[139] It would be the task of villagers like the Chortitzans to successfully present themselves as ethnic Germans in order to gain the most from their situation in Ukraine and survive resettlement in the Reich.

The *VoMi* waited until the last moment to order the evacuation of the ethnic Germans. One explanation for doing so was to be able to continue anti-Jewish operations. Racial goals of extermination were so important that it sometimes led the *SS* to place liquidation of Jewish prisoners above evacuation of Germans from the Soviet Union.[140] Ethnic German involvement in ethnic cleansing had been an opportunity for them to demonstrate their loyalty to the Third Reich. The second reason for delayed resettlement was that Nazi officials firmly believed that the German Army would be able to halt the Soviet advance. Even when it became clear that ethnic Germans on the west bank of the Dnieper would need to be moved, resettlement was still focused on providing nearby permanent homes for the ethnic Germans not far from their original villages. Expectations for a quick, straightforward, and final resettlement were never realized. Although the Chortitza Germans were finally settled in Poland, even this move would prove to be temporary in spite of the *VoMi's* hopes for permanence.

When the Germans accepted their loss of Ukraine, instead of leaving behind their "pure" ethnic German population, Nazi officials decided to use the ethnic Germans to

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[139] While the focus of this paper is on the ethnic German populations, native Poles, Russians, and other peoples were also forcibly moved by the German army including girls as young as seven to be used as labor. Theo Schulte, *The German Army and Nazi Policies in Occupied Russia* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 278.

[140] Lower, *Nazi Empire-Building and the Holocaust in Ukraine*, 200.

propagate claims to other land. Historian Wendy Lower argues that Hitler knew he needed a large German population in order to establish control and maintain conquered territory.[141] Even as the *VoMi* knew that securing Ukraine by having ethnic Germans there had failed at this point, racial ideology and their goals for ethnic Germans made officials look toward Poland, specifically the Warthegau. Poland was where Jews, Poles, and those considered not "racially pure" were removed from their homes and farms in order to make room for the arriving ethnic Germans. Instead of Germanizing Ukraine, ethnic Germans would inhabit Poland and remain there as long as the German Army halted the advance of the Soviets. The hope was that even though Germany had failed to maintain an Aryan presence in Ukraine, it would be successful in Poland. These ethnic communities were to be Hitler's bulwark of Germanness, denoting the importance placed on proving that one fit (time and again) within this fluid identity.[142]

The issue of identity had only arisen when the Soviet Union and Germany confronted each other through war. Prior to World War I, it had not mattered that there were ethnic Germans living in the Soviet Union. While their language and religion had set them apart from neighboring villages, ethnic Germans, the Soviet state, and the German government had not been concerned. Once Germany invaded the Soviet Union, however, the presence of ethnic Germans in Ukraine became very important. As the Third Reich used its racial ideology to reach the state's goals, the true identity of those in Chortitza became relevant. There was but one identity that those in Chortitza needed in

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[141] Lower, *Nazi Empire-Building and the Holocaust in Ukraine*, 204.
[142] Steinhart, *The Holocaust and the Germanization of Ukraine*, 202.

order to survive, and that was what they strove to obtain. Because the state held in its hand the power to change the characteristics of this racial identity, Chortitzans had to convince the *VoMi* (both in the Ukraine as well as in the Reich) that they were in fact the ethnic German people the state desired. Successfully convincing the Germans or Soviets of this would help ensure their survival during the resettlement process as well as protect them from the Soviet labor camps.

The Soviet Experience

The Nazi focus on race was in direct contrast to the Soviet fixation with class and national security. National security concerns had long driven Russian and Soviet policy when dealing with ethnic minorities. One of the many ethnic groups targeted were Germans. During World War I, because of their potential as collaborators, those from the border regions of Russia had been moved east. During the Civil War, many ethnic Germans supported the White Army and found their villages continuously changing hands between the two sides. No better example of Soviet relations with ethnic Germans exists, however, than the experience of the Volga Germans. As previously discussed, Soviet evacuations of ethnic Germans prior to the German occupation were a result of fear that the ethnic Germans would collaborate with the advancing army. In order to avoid persecution, Volga Germans had tried to show how Soviet they were without denying their ethnic German heritage. Studying their fate in World War II reveals what could have befallen the Chortitza Germans had they not been evacuated by the Germans.

The Volga Germans' experiences answered the question of why ethnic Germans were so willing to leave their homes in order to evacuate with the German Army. The

Volga Germans, numbering 440,000 in 1941, largely shared the same experiences of freedom, prosperity, and autonomy of the Chortitza Germans until the turn of the twentieth century.[143] Like those in Chortitza prior to the outbreak of war, the Volga Germans had done their best to prove their loyalty to the Soviet Union without discarding their ethnic identity; for instance, by 1941 they had integrated 800 Russian words and phrases into their German dialect.[144] They had also joined the Soviet military and interacted with their Russian neighbors through trade. Nevertheless, at the outbreak of World War II Stalin was concerned about their possible collaboration with the Nazis. Soviet propaganda spread rumors that the Volga Germans were spies and would sabotage Soviet interests by aiding the German invasion.[145] The official Soviet decree from August 30, 1941 read, "According to reliable reports received from military authorities among the German population living in the region of the Volga exist thousands and tens of thousands of diversionists and spies which are now awaiting a signal from Germany that they should conduct sabotage in the region settled by Volga Germans."[146] This was, in fact, not true.

The experience of the Volga Germans does not merely illustrate the suspicions with which Soviets viewed ethnic Germans, but the consequences of being viewed as a national security threat. The Soviets used 151 train conveys to transport the Volga

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[143] The Center for Volga German Studies at Concordia University, "Deportation" http://cvgs.cu-portland.edu/history/Deportation.cfm (accessed Oct. 26, 2015).
[144] Werner, *Imagined Homes*, 20.
[145] Long, *From Privileged to Dispossessed*, 252.
[146] N.F. Bugai, ed., *Iosif Stalin-Laverentiuu Beri: "Ikh nado deportirovat'": dokumenty, fakty, kommentarii* doc. 3 (Moscow: Druzhba narodov, 1992), 37-38. In J. Otto Pohl, *Ethnic Cleansing in the USSR, 1937-1949* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1999), 35.

German population rather than transporting troops during the German invasion.[147] After Stalin decided to disband the Volga German ASSR, 20,000 NKVD troops deported its inhabitants on September 11, 1941 to Siberia and Kazakhstan on short notice (some had ten days to prepare for deportation, others only had minutes).[148] Approximately 40 percent of the Volga Germans perished during the deportation and resettlement due to insufficient food and water, inclement weather, and overcrowding during transport.[149] The male population was often separated from their families and sent to work in the *trudarmee* (labor force). Despite valiant efforts to prove their loyalty to the Soviet Union, the Volga Germans were not able to convince the Soviets and suffered deportation as a result. Those in Chortitza, while evading deportation by the Soviets in 1941, knew that their collaboration with the Nazis would not go unpunished. Using the fate of the Volga Germans, who had never collaborated with the Germans, as a tool of measurement, those in Chortitza were correct in wanting to move out of the grasp of Stalin.[150] Chortitzans had aided the German Army, participated in the Holocaust, and joined the *Selbstschutz.* The resettlement of the settlement of Chortitza was, therefore, not only in accordance with *VoMi* plans but crucial to ethnic German survival.[151]

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[147] The Center for Volga German Studies at Concordia University, "Deportation" http://cvgs.cu-portland.edu/history/Deportation.cfm (accessed Oct. 26, 2015).
[148] Ibid.
[149] Ibid.
[150] Indeed, as chapter four will discuss, many ethnic Germans were repatriated by the Soviet Union after the war.
[151] Irina Mukhina's article describing the experiences of ethnic Germans from 1942 to 1945 illustrate the malnutrition, hard labor, separation from family, and death that fell upon ethnic Germans who did not resettle. Rather, they were taken from their special settlements and forced to join the *trudarmee* or labor army. Irina Mukhina, "To Be Like All But Different: Germans in Soviet *Trudarmee*" *Europe-Asia Studies* 63, no. 5 (July 2011): 857-874.

Resettlement Plans

The evacuation of Chortitza is an example of the process the *VoMi* used to resettle ethnic Germans. A telegram from the governor of the Galicia district in western Ukraine highlights the Nazi resettlement plan in action. Intercepted by British Intelligence in 1943, the telegram recorded the Galician governor's request for *SS Sturmbannführer* Heinze to, upon receiving permission, transport 1,600 Chortitza Germans to Litzmannstadt (Lodz).[152] Ethnic Germans living in the Chortitza area began to leave on transports during the months of September and October.[153] Other intercepted telegrams from *Volksdeutsche* headquarters in Ukraine to the Berlin *VoMi* office were requests of Chortitza Germans taking advantage of the opportunity to leave the Soviet Union and requesting permission to travel on their own to relatives in the Reich. The *VoMi* officials conveying the requests to Berlin emphasized that these individuals had already been recorded on the *Volksliste* and were therefore registered with the Reich.[154] If one was registered with greater Germany, it meant that they had an appropriate level of Germanness and held identification to prove it. Yet, as this chapter will demonstrate, when they returned to the Reich and wanted to receive German citizenship, they had to convince another set of *VoMi* officials of their Germanness.

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[152] Gouv. des Distrikts Galizien to HSSuPf Ludz, Oct. 20, 1943. H.W.16/37. GG Nr. 1: DSA de LYP8 1951 SSD EST Nr. 15 1815 238 DQAe4 3742. *Sturmbannführer* was a rank equivalent to that of a major in the *SS*. While German policy did affect the lives of ethnic Germans, Hoffmeyer had intended for the Chortitza Germans and others in the Ukraine to remain where they were as bastions of Germanness in the Third Reich's newly acquired territory. It was only because the German Army failed to hold this land that the ethnic Germans were then moved to other locations.

[153] *Volksdeutsche* is a term denoting the origin of the individuals as living outside the boundaries of the Reich as opposed to the *Reichsdeutsche* who lived within the nation's borders.

[154] VD-Leitstelle Alexanderstadt to S.S.-Obergruppenfuehrer Lorenz, Vomi Berlin. Oct. 13, 1943. H.W.16/37. DD Nr. 12: SQF de SQV 2335 DTF6 Nr. 10 1030 382 DQH 3121.

The two years prior to resettlement had been a welcome respite from Soviet rule economically, politically, religiously, and socially. Churches once again had been used for weekly religious services, and school children learned the German language in school (few knew Russian until the 1930s).[155] Harvests from the collective farms were distributed to the people instead of specific quotas needing to be fulfilled and then confiscated.[156] In addition to restored freedom of cultural expression, villagers did not worry about deportation or conscription into the Soviet Army.[157] Occupation had been hope-filled for ethnic Germans who had limited peace since the beginning of World War I that had brought nightly visits by the NKVD resulting in the disappearance of male family members. It was because of this that, despite imminent Soviet arrival, not all ethnic Germans wanted to leave their homes.[158] Chortitzans had successfully proven themselves as ethnic Germans, and resettlement could possibly alter this status, which it did. Hesitation at leaving Chortitza is illustrated by the following quote of an ethnic German who had before the war served a five-year term in a Soviet gulag. "In the fall of 1943 the sudden order to decamp, to flee seemed a disaster for us. It appeared that everything accomplished during the occupation to move our life along new but still familiar paths had been for naught."[159] Because life had returned to a semblance of the prosperity they had experienced in between conflicts, many ethnic Germans wanted to

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[155] During the 1930s, church buildings had been converted into offices or used as movie theaters instead of villagers being able to hold church services in them.
[156] Neufeld, *Path of Thorns*, 237.
[157] At this time there was pressure to join the *Selbstschutz* though.
[158] Schulte, *The German Army and Nazi Policies in Occupied Russia*, 277-279. Fleischhauer and Pinkus, *The Soviet Germans Past and Present*, 87. Eventually 72,000 ethnic Germans from Chortitza and the surrounding area would leave.
[159] Neufeld, *Path of Thorns*, 229.

stay now that their houses and fields had been returned to them; yet, they must have known that their lives would not remain prosperous and peace-filled once the territory came under the control of the Soviets again. Waldemar Koehn, nine years old at the time, remembers his family struggling with this decision; it was, after all, an opportunity to escape a return to the restrictive, fear-filled life they had lived prior to German occupation where nights were spent anxiously listening for the sound of the NKVD out making arrests.[160] Yet, if they left, ethnic Germans faced an uncertain future. If they stayed, they would be subjected to reprisals from the Soviet Army. Chortitza Germans reasoned that if prior to German invasion they had been regarded as traitors (arrested in the middle of the night, taken to Dnepropetrovsk for interrogation, and then sentenced to hard labor), their punishment would be no lighter after the German invasion when they truly had collaborated with Germany. They also had the experiences of the Volga Germans as an example of what their fate might be.

The German Army had their own ways of convincing ethnic Germans to resettle.[161] Not only did they command all ethnic Germans to leave, but they threatened to confiscate the identification cards of those who remained behind.[162] Not having an identification card in an area controlled by the Soviet Union meant certain death.

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[160] Indeed, some German-Russian evacuees used the term "liberator" and "grateful" to describe both the German Army's invasion of Ukraine as well as assistance in leaving their home villages ahead of the Soviet Army. Neufeld, *Path of Thorns* 235.

[161] Steinhart, *The Holocaust and the Germanization of Ukraine* 202.

[162] Robert Koehl, *RKFDV: German Resettlement and Population Policy, 1939-1945: A History of the Reich Commission for the Strengthening of Germandom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), 172. Waldemar Koehn, *Memoirs*, 13. Steinhart, *The Holocaust and the Germanization of Ukraine*, 202. While German policy did affect the lives of ethnic Germans, Hoffmeyer had intended for the Chortitza Germans and others in the Ukraine to remain where they were as bastions of Germanness in the Third Reich's newly acquired territory. It was only because the German Army failed to hold this land that the ethnic Germans were then moved to other locations.

Nevertheless, not everyone left. Inexplicably, two families from the village of Gruenfeld, located just west of Chortitza, decided to remain behind; their fate remains unknown.[163]

Transported to the Reich

The last German evacuee train left Chortitza on October 21, 1943. A *VoMi* official confirmed, in a message to Berlin, that Chortitza was now completely evacuated.[164] Train cars and horse-drawn wagons were the two primary modes of transportation used during evacuation. While individuals who were fortunate enough to travel by train made it to safety in the Reich sooner, each had their share of difficulties. All were being resettled and all would have to prove their Germanness anew to another set of *VoMi* officials upon entering the Reich regardless of their social status. None of the evacuees were able to take all of their personal belongings with them. For the wealthy Zaft family of Chortitza, connections with the mayor garnered them half a boxcar for their family. Less prominent people endured the trip with thirty other people; their luggage crammed into the same space. Yet, though the Zafts were able to bring with them barrels of dried fruit, a hand-carved rocking horse, and Rudolf Zaft's equipment for his photography business, the family had to leave many possessions behind including seven year old Lilly Zaft's dolls. Lilly's parents never discussed the possibility or probability of return. To Lilly, however, it seemed as if they were taking a short trip and would return soon to their home in Chortitza. It would be nearly fifty years

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[163] John Friesen, *Against the Wind: The Story of Four Mennonite Villages Gnadental, Gruenfeld, Neu-Chortitza and Steinfeld in Southern Ukraine, 1872-1943* (Winnipeg: Henderson Books, 1994), 101.
[164] Vomi Alexanderstadt to OGruf Lorenz, Berlin, OGruf Pruetzmann, Luzk. Oct 22, 1943. H.W.16/39. FF. Nr. DSE de SQV 0745 (22.10) DTP6 Nr. 15 1600 150 DQAe4 511.

later, after the fall of the Soviet Union that a member of their family returned to what once had been Chortitza.[165]

The train carrying the Zaft family departed on September 29, 1943 from the neighboring town of Einlage with thirty cars and 997 people.[166] The trip itself lasted eleven days without privacy, water for bathing, or hygiene facilities. Most railroad cars were so crowded that the occupants could not properly lie down to rest.[167] Not only was there physical discomfort involved in traveling, but there was also danger and uncertainty. Due to the proximity of the German-Soviet front by this time, there was continual danger of attack. William Henry Hann, a native of Chortitza traveling with his family by train, remembers the number of unexploded bombs that littered the area along the railroad tracks.[168] Johann Rempel, a Mennonite from Einlage, recalled that it was only after they were three days into their journey that they found out that they were headed to Lodz (Litzmannstadt); yet Lodz was only a transit point, not their final destination.[169] The trains entering the Reich from the Soviet Union stopped in Lodz and their passengers were deloused. Men and women were separated into two groups, asked to remove their clothes, and directed by Nazi soldiers to large rooms with showers while their garments were washed. Ethnic Germans felt humiliated that they were not "good

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[165] Lilly Zaft. Interview with Author. Mercersburg, Hagerstown, Dec. 13, 2013 and May 18, 2015.
[166] During Soviet deportations of Poles in the winter of 1940 to 1941, similar conditions existed for those packed into cattle cars. Although the leader in charge of the operation, Lavrentiy Beria, had called for thirty persons to a car, numbers ranging from forty to sixty were more typical. Similar treatment regarding lack of hygiene facilities, food, and water causes one to wonder how highly German officials valued the Volksdeutsche. Katherine R. Jolluck, *Exile and Identity: Polish Women in the Soviet Union during World War II* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002), 18.
[167] Johann Rempel, "Escape from Communism" In *Gathering at the Hearth: Stories Mennonites Tell* edited by John Sharp (Herald Press, 2001), 114.
[168] William Henry Hann, *The Grizzly Bear of Russia* (n.p., 1992), 77.
[169] Ibid.

enough" to enter the Reich until they were cleansed.[170] Some memoirists view the experience as routine armed with the knowledge that everyone underwent delousing. Others used this experience as proof that they were victims of the Third Reich. Regardless, this procedure revealed that while the Nazis saw ethnic Germans being below the status of *Reichsdeutsche* and needing to be cleansed, it was precisely because they were ethnic Germans that "rooms with showers" meant the process of delousing and not of death. Perhaps unaware of this, they were cognizant of their lower status.

Those who did not board a train like the Zaft family followed from the Chortitza settlement on foot or in wagons, a journey the ethnic Germans subsequently referred to as the Great Trek or *Grosser Treck.*[171] The difference between those who went by train and those who traveled with horse and wagon was based on class, livelihood, and geographic proximity to the front. Historian Eric J. Schmaltz points out that normally it was the elderly and women or those dangerously close to Soviet lines that were transported on trains.[172]

Many who traveled by wagon had livestock with them. Because farming was their livelihood farm animals were a necessity; thus farmers were very attached to

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[170] Neufeld, *Path of Thorns*, 294. In addition, many were embarrassed at being asked to walk naked in front of Nazi officials. Justina Neufeld, *A Family Torn Apart,* (Kitchener, Ont: Pandora Press, 2003), 123. Lilly Zaft. Interview with Author. Mercersburg, PA. Dec. 13, 2013.
[171] Giesinger, *From Catherine to Khrushchev*, 311. For some, the journey took six months from the date they left their homes to when they were finally resettled. In the case of Neufeld, he and his village traveled from September 12, 1943 to March 12, 1944. Neufeld, *Path of Thorns* 296.
[172] Eric J. Schmaltz, "The 'Long Trek': The SS Population Transfer of Ukrainian Germans to the Polish Warthegau and Its Consequences, 1943-1944," *Journal of the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia* 31, no. 3 (Fall 2008): 1-23.

them.[173] Cows, pigs, and chickens were also brought along during the trek to provide milk and meat. The retreating German Army implemented a scorched earth policy in which no resources including livestock were to be left behind for the Soviet Army.[174] Ethnic Germans traveling by train, on the other hand, either did not bring their livestock with them or did not have any to begin with. There were cases of those who had started traveling by wagon but had to finish the last portion of their journey by train when the Soviet Army got dangerously close in the winter of 1943-1944. They had to relinquish their livestock in order to board trains and were issued notes promising to reimburse them.[175]

Evacuation by train was unpleasant for some, but conditions were understandably more harsh during the Great Trek. Those who had lost their horses or carts to the Soviet Army and did not board a train were unable to bring any of their possessions with them.[176] During resettlement 6 to 7 percent of ethnic Germans from Ukraine died on the trek.[177] Two resettlers died from each of the villages of Neu-Chortitza, Gnadental, and Steinfeld. Six people from the village of Grünfeld died.[178] Paul Hann, a native of the Chortitza settlement, was in charge of leading a group of wagons westward to Poland. A member of the *Selbstschutz*, or Self-Defense Unit, Hann

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[173] Schmaltz, "The 'Long Trek': The SS Population Transfer of Ukrainian Germans to the Polish Warthegau and Its Consequences, 1943-1944."
[174] Even houses were burned by Nazi soldiers following the evacuation of ethnic German villages.
[175] Schmaltz, "The 'Long Trek': The SS Population Transfer of Ukrainian Germans to the Polish Warthegau and Its Consequences, 1943-1944," n.p.
[176] Schulte, *The German Army and Nazi Policies in Occupied Russia*, 278-279.
[177] The 6 to 7 percent figure equated to about 20,000 to 25,000 individuals. Schmaltz, "'The Long Trek': The SS Population Transfer of Ukrainian Germans to the Polish Warthegau and its Consequences, 1943-1944," n.p.
[178] John Friesen, *Against the Wind*, 101. It was usually the elderly or young who did not survive.

led 300 people and 30 wagons from Rosenfeld and Felsenbach, two of the villages in the Chortitza settlement.[179] Although the *Selbstschutz* had previously been used as murderous accomplices of the Nazis, during resettlement they were used to lead wagon trains, to protect the trains from partisans, and to assist along the way. Village groups stayed together to offer aid and as much protection as possible to each other; after the chaos of each day's trek, villagers would leave their long wagon train at night to look for their fellow villagers when it came time to camp.[180]

The German military had arranged in advance to provide the resettlers with food. For those whose trek continued for six months, their meager supplies of dried fruit dwindled and their livestock were either consumed or became sick and had to be abandoned. In general, the provisions of ethnic German were not sufficient to sustain them the entire way. As planned, the ethnic Germans traveling by horse and wagon did find trek staging-posts where German soldiers provided food or volunteered to butcher some of the evacuees' livestock so that they would have food for the next portion of their trip.[181] Waldemar Koehn remembered the thin soup that he and the others in his wagon train received from these posts.[182] During the late autumn and winter months of 1943, thousands of people were passing through the same towns, quickly draining those resources and causing ethnic Germans to search abandoned fields for potatoes or any other remaining crops. To the villages along the path of the trek, it was clear that these

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[179] Paul Hann, *An Incredible Pilgrimage: Another Paul's Life-Story* (n.p., 1999), 16.
[180] Karl Stumpp, *The German-Russians: Two Centuries of Pioneering* (Bonn: Atlantic-Edition Forum, 1967), 128.
[181] Koehl, *RKFDV*, 102-103. Schulte, *The German Army and Nazi Policies in Occupied Russia*, 281.
[182] Waldemar Koehn. *Memoirs.* 13.

resettlers were ethnic German not only because of news of the Soviet advance and therefore the retreat of the Germans but because of their German language. Nevertheless, attitudes toward them were mixed. Some viewed them with pity while others stole their horses and refused to shelter them.[183]

As the Eastern Front continued to move westward plans for resettlement evolved. At first, the ethnic Germans living east of the Dnieper were to travel to colonies on the west side of the river. It had been believed that German forces would use the Dnieper River as a new immovable front. Then, when the Soviet Army pushed past the Dnieper, Hoffmeyer allotted land in western Ukraine for resettlement. In his diary, Neufeld recorded the constantly changing route that those in his trek had to follow. With little information other than that the German Army was retreating, Neufeld and the line of wagons from Nikolaifeld, Gnadenfeld, and other German villages from the left and right banks of the Dnieper continued moving west, relying on the orders of the *VoMi* and Hoffmeyer. When Hoffmeyer discarded the western Ukraine plan, the trek moved toward Bialystock, an area along the former Russia-Poland border.[184] Once again *VoMi* officials altered those orders and on March 5, 1944, Neufeld and 800 other people from Gnadenfeld, Franztal, and Paulsheim found themselves aboard a train bound for the Warthegau.[185] These changes in route testify to the improvisation of Nazi and *VoMi*

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[183] Schmaltz, "The 'Long Trek': The SS Population Transfer of Ukrainian Germans to the Polish Warthegau and Its Consequences, 1943-1944," n.p.
[184] Neufeld, *Path of Thorns*, 289.
[185] Ibid., 292, 293.

officials as destinations and routes were continually being revised due to military movements.

The evolving situation generated frustration from the ethnic Germans. Hoffmeyer's continued reference of them as resettlers became a point of contention with some individuals such as Neufeld who believed that they were no longer resettlers but refugees.[186] The difference in word choices has much to do with the connotation of each term. A settler is one who usually comes to live on virgin land while a resettler is someone picked up and moved to another place. As opposed to the established concept of refugee, resettler was a relatively new term in the 1940s and was an integral part of Nazi racial ideology. Differences between use of the terms "resettlers" and "refugees" also denoted status (resettlers were under the jurisdiction of the *VoMi*). In addition, word choice revealed the way in which the speaker, in choosing to use either "resettler" or "refugee," viewed the moving population. Therefore, Neufeld's belief that he and his fellow travelers should be termed refugees makes sense. He believed that their status had changed since they had not reached their ever-changing destination after traveling for three months. (They would travel for another three months before finally being settled.) With little information about their destination, the *VoMi's* plans for them, or Hoffmeyer's interest in their existence, ethnic Germans felt disconnected from the organization tasked to aid them. After working hard to convince this organization of their eligibility for the protection and benefits that came with their status as ethnic Germans, they were

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[186] It is difficult to ascertain what the German word used here was because Neufeld's published diary has been translated into English. One ethnic German remembers *Vertriebene* used to describe those on the Trek. The implications and ramifications of terms used in labeling deserves more study.

disappointed and seemed to have been left on their own. The mud and cold, broken wagon wheels, starving children, and dying livestock were valid concerns that ethnic Germans did not feel were being addressed.

Hoffmeyer, on the other hand, still viewed his charges as resettlers. He was continuing to form further plans with new destinations for them and did not want to relinquish the power he had in directing their resettlement. In January 1944, he wrote a letter to help repair the limited communication that existed between him and the ethnic Germans walking an average of 30 kilometers in the mud and cold each day. The lack of information supplied to the ethnic Germans made Hoffmeyer's open letter very important to those still traveling five months after their September departure. Viewing it as a Christmas gift, Neufeld found Hoffmeyer's communiqué reassuring and helpful. It indicated that someone understood what Hoffmeyer termed their "difficult past and present."[187] Perhaps this news gave them extra comfort knowing that in spite of the hardships they were encountering, Hoffmeyer did not view them as a burden as did some of the German soldiers they interacted with during their journey.[188] In spite of the circumstances and changing plans, ethnic Germans who survived the trek eventually reached their destination in the spring of 1944. Himmler stated that Hoffmeyer had resettled the ethnic German population from the Chortitza area well and had Himmler's

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[187] Jacob Neufeld recorded his thoughts concerning Hoffmeyer's open letter in his January 10, 1944 diary entry. That Neufeld viewed this letter as a Christmas gift is significant. Not only does this show the letter's importance to them, but the ethnic Germans probably had little to celebrate during the Christmas of 1943 even though they were allowed to observe a religious holiday that would have been banned under the Soviet government.

[188] Neufeld, *Path of Thorns*, 289.

"full recognition and thanks" for his work of resettlement.[189] Their new homes proved to be temporary.

The ethnic Germans evacuated by train soon discovered that they were being taken to resettlement camps supervised by Himmler. Officials directed arriving Chortitzans at the train station to the Stargard Lager in West Prussia while others, such as the Zafts who had boarded a train in Einlage, went to the Neustadt Barackenlager. The camp mayor met the newly arrived village of Einlage at the train station where wagons transported families and luggage to their temporary home.[190] The resettlement camps in Neustadt and Stargard were located near Danzig, West Prussia.[191] Danzig was where the founding fathers of Chortitza had emigrated from when they settled the Chortitza settlement. Now one hundred and fifty years later, the descendants of the original settlers were returning to their ancestral homeland. This time, however, they were returning not necessarily by choice but due to the war's circumstances and specifically orders from Hitler to place the Chortitza Germans in Danzig, West Prussia where they would have to prove their Germanness once again in order to be given German citizenship since *VoMi* officials wanted to be sure that their personal lives and genealogy fit their ethnic German status.[192]

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[189] Der Reichfuehrer-SS an SS-Obergruppenfuehrer Lorenz, June 28, 1944, in SS Offizier Akte Horst Hoffmeyer, NARA, RG 242, A3343, SSO-109A, 1465. In Steinhart, *The Holocaust and the Germanization of Ukraine.*
[190] Rudolph Zaft. Photograph Collection. *Umsiedlungslager*, 1943.
[191] A.J. Kroeker, *First Mennonite Villages in Russia 1789-1943* (Cloverdale, B.C.: D.W. Friesen & Sons, 1981), 235.
[192] Pavel Pohlian, *Against their Will: The History and Geography of Forced Migrations in the USSR* (New York: Central European University Press, 2004), 33.

Proving Germanness (Again)

The ancestors of these Chortitza Germans had left for Russia due, in part, to the promise of greater freedoms. Now, those from Chortitza and other German villages were confined (taken "into custody" as one ethnic German described the situation) to camps where they were housed in barracks surrounded by sixteen to eighteen-foot barbed wire, separated from the rest of the Reich's population.[193] The Zaft family tried to obtain permission to rent a house outside the barbed wire, as they certainly had the financial means to do so. Although requests for housing in the adjoining town were denied, the mayor allowed the Zafts to choose which barrack to live in.[194] They chose *Baracke* 1, *Zimmer* 10 because it did not have a direct view of the barbed wire as they tried to avoid any reminders of their limited freedoms.[195] The German officers required camp inmates to observe a curfew while ethnic Germans also depended upon food rations granted to them by the authorities. Because of these restrictions, some Chortitzans felt like prisoners. Certain Nazi officials may have identified Chortitzans as ethnic German while in Ukraine, but this did not mean that Nazi officials in greater Germany fully trusted them or felt their care should be a top priority. After all, they were *Volksdeutsche,* ethnic Germans who had lived outside the Reich's borders in the Soviet Union for over one hundred years. They would have to prove themselves worthy of being termed *Reichsdeutsche,* a category with constantly changing requirements.

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[193] John E. Sharp, ed., *Gathering at the Hearth: Stories Mennonites Tell* (Scottdale, Penn: Herald Press, 2001), 114, 115. Johann Rempel, "Escape from Communism," 114.
[194] Ibid.
[195] Captured German War Records A3342, Series EWZ50, Frame 0276. National Archives, College Park, MD.

After ethnic Germans evacuated their homes and arrived at resettlement camps, the final component of the resettlement experience was German citizenship. Historian Marlene Epp argues that bestowing German citizenship on the ethnic German newcomers was the result of Germany's desire to promote a greater presence in occupied territory. Although the Red Army continued to press westward, officials believed that the German Army would halt their advance permanently. Therefore, *VoMi* officials especially wanted to resettle ethnic German farmers from Ukraine in the Warthegau.[196] Their presence was supposed to Germanize the area, thereby helping Germany lay claim to the land, while providing a cultural bastion against the Russian front. In order to accomplish these goals those settling the land needed to not only have ties to Germany through ethnicity but through citizenship.

Individuals from Chortitza had undergone scrutiny before being considered ethnic Germans and becoming part of the *Volksdeutsche* list. Nevertheless, before citizenship could be conferred these same ethnic Germans had to undergo further physical tests and examinations.[197] These assessments were done by a special team of *VoMi* officials who had not been in Ukraine; they were to determine whether one was (once again) truly an ethnic German. The criteria the Nazi officials followed was based on pre-determined policy.[198] Four different categories created by *Deutsche Volksliste* (DVL), the German National List, were used to categorize the arriving ethnic Germans.

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[196] Epp, *Women without Men*, 49.
[197] Ethnic German accounts do not record annoyance or anger that their German identity was being questioned yet again. There is an instance of one ethnic German finding the physical examination (that included measurements of the forehead, hands, head, etc.) to be comical.
[198] Pertti Ahonen, "On Forced Migrations: Transnational Realities and National Narratives in Post-1945 (West) Germany" *German History* 32, no. 4 (Dec. 2014): 605.

The first category included those Germans who were racially pure and supporters of Nazism. The second group was comprised of Germans who were racially pure but not committed to Nazi ideology. *SS* officials granted those in these first two categories the status of *Reichsdeutsche,* citizens of the German Reich. The third category contained those with German blood who, during the next ten years, would hopefully re-Germanize as determined by the German government. The final group contained those the Nazis marked for death because of a lack of German blood or the lack of desire or inability to re-Germanize.[199] While these categories seem clear cut, *VoMi* officials in non-homogeneous ethnic areas such as Transnistria found that determining who was or was not German was much more difficult.

Information on ethnic Germans' commitment to ideology was found under questions five, eight, and eleven on the *Einwanderungszentralstelle* (EWZ) form. Question five asked ethnic Germans what religion they identified with. Question eight asked for the applicant to describe any party membership he had held whether cultural or political, German or foreign, municipal or local. Question eleven inquired into one's involvement in criminal proceedings including those of a political nature. One was to include the offense, penalty, and date sentenced. The only organizations that ethnic Germans from Chortitza belonged to, according to these forms, were work-related *Verband.*[200] Whether this is proof that ethnic German Mennonites from Chortitza did not belong to any political organizations or merely failed to admit their participation in

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[199] Fleischhauer and Pinkus, *The Soviet Germans Past and Present,* 96.
[200] Even then, only six of the 125 EWZ records examined listed "*verband*."

Soviet organizations remains to be seen. It also causes one to wonder what Nazi organizations were available for ethnic Germans to join while they were still living in Ukraine.

German officials recorded the information of all incoming ethnic Germans in the spring of 1944. These records were known as EWZ records or immigration records.[201] Seventy officials comprised the information collection team. Those in the Neustadt Resettlement Camp met these officials at the train station. The paperwork and examination took anywhere from three hours to two days to complete depending on the volume of incoming ethnic Germans.[202] These records provide a wealth of information because of the demographic data officials required individuals to provide and because individuals completed the forms in full. The EWZ records detailed the applicant's birth place, birth date, occupation, criminal background, and marriage information. In addition, the applicant had to state their citizenship, nationality, and genealogical information from whence officials determined whether or not they were 100 percent German.[203] For example, Kornelius Klassen is listed in his EWZ family tree as being 100 percent German; however, his wife Olga Moloulyka was 0 percent German and 100 percent Ukrainian. Therefore, the family as a whole was, according to the form, only 50

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[201] Kate Brown, *A Biography of No Place: From Ethnic Borderland to Soviet Heartland* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 197. Microfilm copies housed in the National Archives in College Park, Maryland supply researchers with pertinent information regarding ethnic German populations. EWZ A3342 Series 50, National Archives, College Park, MD. The examination of 125 EWZ Series 50 records of individuals from the Chortitza area provided the data used in this thesis.
[202] Schmaltz, "The 'Long Trek': The SS Population Transfer of Ukrainian Germans to the Polish Warthegau and Its Consequences, 1943-1944," n.p.
[203] Germans from Russia Heritage Society, "The GDO EWZ Village-Family Database Project" http://www.grhs.org/chapters/gdo/EWZIndex-Village.htm (accessed Dec. 8, 2014). Roll, "EWZ Forms" http://www.rollintl.com/roll/ewz.htm (accessed Dec. 8, 2014).

percent German.[204] Questions concerning whether the applicant spoke fluent German, used German at home, or whether or not one's family spoke predominately in German were almost always answered in the affirmative.[205] Processing large groups of ethnic Germans included the inspection of documents detailing religious affiliation and political involvement. Photographs of each subject were taken in addition to interviews and processing of property receipts. The Tschinkurs, a German family from Latvia, are an example of how all ethnic Germans experienced these protocols. Resettled in East Prussia in response to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Agreement, the Tschinkurs' physical characteristics such as eye color, hair color, and nose shape determined if they were fit Aryans.[206] During resettlement, racial purity, an important component of Germanness, was reinforced by *Rasse-Kartei* or race cards.[207] Race cards were forms that ethnic Germans completed in addition to other immigration paperwork. A detailed chart on one side included information on hair color, eye color, nose shape, height, and skull formation. The applicant's photograph was attached as well placing emphasis upon the use of exterior physical characteristics to qualify one's ethnic Germanness. These race cards issued to those over the age of fourteen were part of the second set of tests that

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[204] Captured German War Records, EWZ A3342, Series 50. Roll E008, Frames 0822-0844. National Archives, College Park, MD.
[205] This was truthfully answered; children may have known Russian as well because in the 1930s German language was forbidden as a language of instruction in schools. The rest of the population, while perhaps knowing Russian, still used German as their predominant language to communicate to their families and fellow ethnic Germans.
[206] Cathryn Prince, *Death in the Baltic: the World War II Sinking of the Wilhelm Gustloff* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 23-24.
[207] *Rasse-Kartei*, Berlin Document Center Accessioned Microfilm, A3342, Series EWZ56. National Archives, College Park, MD.

ethnic Germans had to pass in order to fully receive the benefits of being a *Reichsdeutsche*.[208]

The question of identity was not only a dialogue between ethnic Germans and Nazi officials; there was concern regarding their acceptance by German citizens living in the Reich. Ella Schneider and her family, originally Volga Germans, left Kiev with the German Army in 1943. As a seven year old, Ella remembers asking her mother if the Germans would recognize them as German or as Russian. Her mother replied, "Since our forefathers came from Germany and we speak German and come from a German heritage, of course they will think of us as Germans."[209] Yet Ella's mother had to constantly remind Ella not to speak in Russian. Neufeld penned in his diary, upon arrival in Jannowitz, Poland that "…the women look us up and down, perhaps wondering whether these strange Russo-Germans have preserved the faintest traces of a German essence."[210] And later in the resettlement camp he wrote in his diary, "Visitors drop by out of curiosity…but they seem to find us rather odd."[211] When ethnic Germans lived in the Soviet Union, it was apparent that they were ethnic German and not Ukrainian or Russian. When brought back to Germany, however, they were different from *Reichsdeutsche* and needed to continually work to "fit in" with the German population.

After the trains had been unloaded, the wagons had arrived, the camps filled, and the paperwork filed, the future of ethnic Germans was still to be decided. Just as

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[208] *Rasse-Kartei*, Berlin Document Center Accessioned Microfilm, A3342, Series EWZ56. National Archives, College Park, MD.
[209] Ella E. Schneider Hilton, *Displaced Person: A Girl's Life in Russia, Germany, and America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004), 29.
[210] Neufeld, *Path of Thorns,* 296.
[211] Ibid., 297.

evacuation had been under the auspices of the German government so too was settlement. Having triumphed over the vague category of *Volksdeutsche* in Ukraine and the more stringent test for becoming a *Reichsdeutsche,* they were now official citizens of the Third Reich. Despite their new status, settlers were not only given little room for personal choices, but were required to contribute to the war effort resulting in the separation of villages. Johann Rempel described how the population of Einlage were no longer able to remain together. Eight families remained in Neustadt at the resettlement camp; however, others were sent to the Warthegau, some joined the German Army, and still others worked in the armament industry in Danzig, all by order of the German government.[212] Those who worked in Danzig at the command of the Reich were transported there to work in the factories.[213] Few, if any, refused to work in an armament factory on moral grounds; however, inhabiting one of the 35,000 farms confiscated from the local Polish or Jewish population went against the conscience of others.[214] German-Russian Mennonites from Gnadenfeld disapproved of other groups of ethnic German, particularly Bessarabian and Baltic-Germans, who accepted the property of Poles. For Neufeld and those from Gnadenfeld, memories of their own removal from their homes would have made, he believed, acceptance of such property "deeply painful." Yet Neufeld, the committed Christian who believed that it was God's providence that had protected them, surmised that perhaps there was no other choice, even commenting in

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[212] Johann Rempel, "Escape from Communism," 115. As registered citizens, they were part of the 110,000 ethnic Germans brought back from the Soviet Union. Pohlian, *Against their Will*, 33.
[213] Lilly Zaft, Transcript of Interview with Author, Mercersburg, PA. Dec. 15, 2013.
[214] Koehl, *RKFDV*, 117. De Zayas, *The German Expellees*, 28.

his diary that it would soon be time to set aside the Golden Rule that they had upheld for so long.[215] Many who settled on these farms did not deny the immorality of it; fear of disobeying the Nazis simply trumped their notions of morality such as the following account describes: "Mother was deeply concerned about who the little house and the livestock belonged to. She did not want to appropriate someone else's property, since she knew so well herself what it was like to be driven from one's house and home." Yet, they accepted the land and "stopped asking dumb questions" when threatened.[216] Those who refused to be resettled, upon learning why these farms were vacant, made the decision to stay confined in a resettlement camp.[217] By doing so, they were demonstrating their lack of Nazi political loyalty.[218]

Rejection of Polish land offered for their resettlement revealed that those individuals from Chortitza were not correctly supporting Nazism. The importance of political leanings at this time when determining ethnicity did play a role as evidenced by the four *DVL* categories; category two consisted of ethnic Germans who were racially pure but did not properly subscribe to Nazi ideology. In addition to refusing to be resettled, the religion of those from Chortitza would have set them further apart. While the Mennonites did not gather together to worship in the resettlement camp but rather

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[215] Neufeld, *Path of Thorns*, 300.
[216] Nelly Daes, *Gone without a Trace: German-Russian Women in Exile* (Lincoln, NE: American Society for Germans from Russia, 2001), 155.
[217] De Zayas, *The German Expellees*, 28. Lilly Zaft, Interview with Author. Mercersburg, Penn. Dec. 13, 2013.
[218] Yet, it is possible that their religious and apolitical leanings were the reason why they were placed in the Warthegau and not elsewhere. Maria Kreiser stated that some ethnic Germans even though they had been given Category One status were still placed in "the Wartheland to be 'Germanized.'" Maria Kreiser, and James Gessele. *Though My Soul More Bent: Memoir of a Soviet German* (Bismarck, N.D.: Germans from Russia Heritage Society, 2003), 55.

met in the woods to sing and pray when allowed to leave the camp, their faith was an integral part of who they were. The importance of religion was another indication that they did not fully align with the policies of the Third Reich. One could argue, therefore, that the treatment of ethnic Germans as prisoners resulted from their politically suspect beliefs even when identified as 100 percent German.

Conclusion

The evacuation of the Chortitza Germans is important in the study of ethnic identity and forced population movements during World War Two for several reasons. The Chortitza evacuation, first of all, is an example of forced migration; the ethnic Germans had little or no choice in remaining in their homes during the German retreat. Although they could have chosen to try to hide, as Waldemar Koehn's family considered doing, it was clear that they were under the control of Germany and its orders and wanted to avoid interaction with the Soviet Union. Notwithstanding compulsion, many ethnic Germans were willing to leave their homes and many of their belongings as a result of fear of reprisals by the Soviet Union. They did not know where they were headed when they left their homes in September and October 1943 or what their future would hold. Because of deported male family members and previously limited freedoms Chortitza Germans knew that there would be punishment at the hands of the Soviets if they stayed.[219] It was indeed a complex situation. The ethnic Germans were forced to evacuate because of their collaboration with the Nazis which they benefited from. While

[219] Steinhart, *The Holocaust and the Germanization of Ukraine*, 37.

they did not ask to become involved in Nazi Germany's goals, they used their involvement as an opportunity to solidify their identity as Germans.

Resettlement also illustrates that even as those from Chortitza utilized their German identity in order to survive during the war, ties to Germany did not solve all of their problems or ensure a comfortable existence. Resettlement was a difficult experience regardless of means of transportation. Meager food supplies, cold weather, and uncomfortable conditions were faced during their transfer from Ukraine to the Reich and Poland. In addition they were expected to serve in the military, work for the war effort in factories, live where directed, or, if refusing, remain inside a barbed-wire fence.

The experience of the Chortitza Germans is important because it shows how military victories and losses directly affected the movement of this population. If the German Army had not been pushed back during the summer and fall of 1943, the Chortitza population would have remained in Ukraine and served as ethnic Germans for an expanding empire. The connection between war and society is clear here. Military victories and losses continued to matter during their evacuation, however, as their safety, route, and final destination depended upon it.

Most importantly, the experience of the Chortitza Germans illustrates that ethnic Germans successfully proved that they were "good" Germans repeatedly in spite of resettlement which placed their Germanness in question. Although the *VoMi* viewed the ethnic Germans as a valuable population that needed to be evacuated, in order to gain German citizenship ethnic Germans had to undergo additional tests. As the concept of Germanness fluctuated, Chortitza Germans were motivated to continually subscribe to a

malleable racial identity in order to survive the war. At a time when race mattered, ethnic German genealogy, physical characteristics, and cultural attributes helped convince *VoMi* officials of their worthiness in becoming German citizens.

Surviving German occupation and resettlement, they still did not enjoy complete autonomy.[220] German-Russian historian Adam Giesinger demonstrated that for those forced to join the German Army, work in the armament industry, move to Poland, or remain in camp, "The fatherland, to which many of them had come with such eager anticipation, proved much less attractive than they had expected, but there was no way out."[221] Escape from the approaching Soviet Army, survival during their journey to resettlement camps in Danzig, and work on farms or in factories were all executed under the watch of the *VoMi*. Now registered as German citizens, attempts at piecing their lives back together into a semblance of normalcy would be rudely interrupted once again during the winter of 1944-1945 as the German Army continued to retreat westward.

[220] Lilly Zaft. Interview with Author. Mercersburg, Penn. Dec. 18, 2013.
[221] Giesinger, *From Catherine to Khrushchev*, 303.

CHAPTER V

SOVIET ADVANCE AND REPATRIATION: A TIME OF CHANGING IDENTITY

It was twenty degrees below zero as a mother and her children hurriedly placed a few bundles onto a wagon pulled by a lame horse. Leaving the Polish farm the *VoMi* had assigned them a year earlier, the Heinz family departed; it was January 1945. Although unsure of their destination, their goal was to stay ahead of the Soviet Army. After traveling for four days, resting for ten, and then traveling for a few more, they settled in a town housing fellow refugees and former neighbors from Neufeld, their home village in Ukraine. Lulled by a sense of false security, it was there that the Soviet Army reached them, repatriating them to Irkutsk, Siberia; the family was separated in the process.[222] This story of the Heinz family is very similar to the experiences of two thirds of the 11,700 from Chortitza who had been resettled in the Reich in late 1943.[223]

Accounts of Soviet repatriation did not begin at the end of the war; for ethnic Germans it started a few months earlier in January 1945.[224] While German citizens fled from raping, looting, and murder, accounts showed that ethnic Germans wanted to escape being captured and returned "home" in addition to avoiding personal harm. Although ethnic Germans who remained in resettlement camps had limited government

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[222] For the purposes of this chapter, the term refugee may be defined not in terms of the later 1951 United Nations definition, but rather as an individual who has had to leave their home particularly due to war. Peter Gatrell, *A Whole Empire Walking: Refugees in Russia during World War I* (Bloomington, Ind: Indiana University Press, 1999), 9. Nelly Däs, and Nancy Bernhardt Holland. *Gone Without a Trace: German-Russian Women in Exile* (Lincoln, Neb: American Historical Society of Germans from Russia, 2001), 157, 158.

[223] William Schroeder, and Helmut T. Huebert. *Mennonite Historical Atlas* (Winnipeg: Springfield Publishers, 1990), 91.

[224] One could argue that repatriation had begun in 1943 when some ethnic German evacuees were overtaken by advancing Soviet forces.

help during evacuation, they no longer received special jurisdiction under the *VoMi* because their status had changed to that of *Reichsdeutsche*. As refugees, they had to navigate the complexities of their multi-faceted identity not only as ethnic Germans with Soviet backgrounds but as *Reichsdeutsche.* At times, they were able to use their Soviet past as a means to escape harm, but ethnic Germans mostly kept their Soviet birthplaces and residences secret. This chapter argues that although ethnic Germans were no longer a part of Nazi plans, they were still important to the Soviet Union's goals. Unwilling to be deemed Soviet, ethnic Germans used their malleable identity to place themselves in the best situation possible in post-war Germany. The Soviets and Allies identified ethnic Germans as Soviet citizens; yet, flight was a combination of physical removal as well as identity change. While this certainly harkens to the beginning of the Cold War, it is also an example of the state believing certain individuals belong to them (through prior citizenship), and the tenacity and agency of those individuals in contesting those claims.

Historiography

Repatriation as part of ethnic German historiography can also be divided into three categories. Some scholars view the winter and spring of 1944-1945 as the epitome of violence against ethnic Germans. Alfred de Zayas, in particular, believes that the experience of ethnic Germans toward the end of the war justifies terming them victims. I, however, choose to avoid that word because it implies a lack of agency. This is not intended to discredit the difficult experiences of ethnic Germans; ethnic minorities were targeted by the Soviet Union. They were not victims (in the sense of lacking agency) however, because they made their racial identity malleable, navigating each situation to

the best of their ability. Secondary sources mention repatriation attempts that occurred in 1943 often as deportations. During repatriation in 1945, however, individuals had already experienced the difficulties of leaving their homes in Ukraine. Now, they experienced forced removal to Siberia or Kazakhstan in addition, which must have been devastating. While the act of repatriation remains tied to the Soviet Union, accounts often accuse the Allies for allowing repatriation to happen; no narratives blame war-torn Germany. Instead, memoirs portray ethnic Germans as being betrayed by the Americans, British, and French.[225] It is surprising that victimization narratives, while having the potential to exploit the repatriation of ethnic Germans, hardly speak of it.[226]

Institutional narratives are important when addressing the issue of ethnic German repatriation. Because many works on repatriation are in the Russian language, there is a need for an in-depth study in English. The Soviet perspective is certainly an important component of the study of repatriation because German organizations such as the *VoMi* had collapsed by then. Yet little is published on the Soviet Commission for Repatriation or the camp system they maintained. Allied governments are portrayed as being responsible for repatriation by conceding to the Soviets' demands, allowing them to enter the Allied zones to find repatriates after signing the Yalta Agreement and Potsdam

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[225] Justina Neufeld, *A Family Torn Apart* (Kitchener, Ontario: Pandora Press, 2003.

[226] Samuel Sinner is completely silent and does not include it in his study of ethnic German "genocide." Alfred de Zayas chooses to use the phrase "abducted into the Soviet Union" instead of repatriation. Even the accounts of repatriation that de Zayas uses in his book are of ethnic Germans returning voluntarily to the Soviet Union or those where the individuals escaped from Soviet gulags.

Agreement.[227] Irina Mukhina's work gives a brief overview of repatriation, particularly from the perspective of the Soviet government. A discussion of repatriation was still very limited and far from what is needed. David Rock, Stefan Wolff, and Pavel Polian shift the discussion away from the civilian population to focus on the transfer of skilled industrialists to the Soviet Union.[228] J. Otto Pohl includes a page on repatriation in his book. Yet, in his brief discussion no agency is given to ethnic Germans; instead, governments do the acting.[229] This is in direct opposition to primary source accounts of ethnic Germans fleeing, deceiving, and changing their identity. While Adam Giesinger's several pages on repatriation in his classic work are mostly from a top down approach, he does include one sentence on how ethnic Germans had done their best to try to escape repatriation; he titles his chapter "Liquidation."[230] Mennonite-specific works on repatriation focus on the Mennonite Central Committee, a Mennonite organization which worked directly with the International Refugee Organization and the American Zone governor to enable Mennonite immigration to Holland.[231] While the MCC's contribution should be recognized, positioning ethnic Germans as helpless refugees does not accurately portray their experiences after the war. The accounts by U.S. and Canadian

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[227] It is important to remember that American territory in western Berlin had in fact been handed over by the Soviets only after Americans gave up previously-held territory elsewhere in Germany. Territory exchanges contributed to the already occurring population movements and repatriation efforts.
[228] David Rock, and Stefan Wolff, *Coming Home to Germany?: The Integration of Ethnic Germans from Central and Eastern Europe in the Federal Republic Since 1945* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2001).
[229] J. Otto Pohl, *Ethnic Cleansing in the USSR, 1937-1949* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1999), 45.
[230] Adam Giesinger, *From Catherine to Khrushchev: The Story of Russia's Germans* (Battleford, Saskatchewan: Marian Publishers, 1974), 314.
[231] Gerlof D. Homan, "'We have Come to Love Them': Russian Mennonite Refugees in the Netherlands" *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 25 (2007): 39-59. T.D. Regehr, "Of Dutch or German Ancestry?: Mennonite Refugees, MCC, and the International Refugee Organization" *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 13 (1995): 7-25.

Mennonites assume hero-like qualities as seen in leader Peter Dyck's "rescue" of a family living in France. The title of his account "Kidnaped?" [*sic*] is followed by him assuming the acting role in the story while the family states, "'They have come from Canada to save us,'" sits in the car while Dyck negotiates with the Dutch border guards, and upon entrance into the country exclaims that they are rescued.[232]

There is room for *Alltagsgeschichte* narratives that focus on specific geographic or demographic experiences with repatriation. Combining a top down and bottom up approach provides context for repatriation. It is important to understand why the Soviets wanted to repatriate ethnic Germans and why the Allies were willing to cooperate. It is also crucial, however, to understand the post-war goals of ethnic Germans regarding returning to their homes in the Soviet Union. Lastly, a study of repatriation is an opportunity to show how ethnic Germans even after the war still needed to have a malleable identity. For instance, Mennonites claimed Dutch citizenship even though they had not lived in the Netherlands for 300 years or were acquainted with any Dutch culture. Others at this time pretended to be different Eastern European nationalities to avoid repatriation to the Soviet Union.

For ethnic Germans, repatriation was an overwhelming source of fear, and an encouragement to immigrate to North and South America. Statistics reveal that approximately two thirds of the ethnic Germans that left Ukraine were brought back to the Soviet Union. Yet, most narratives of ethnic Germans in 1945 treat repatriation with silence. If classic works on ethnic Germans do not address repatriation, then why do

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[232] Peter Dyck, "Kidnaped?" [sic] *Mennonite Life* 1, no. 1 (Jan. 1946): 43.

primary source accounts speak of repatriation as a major event?[233] Perhaps this is because of the complicated legal status of ethnic Germans after the war. For instance Kate Brown skips the topic even though her epilogue discusses *Aussiedler,* ethnic Germans who immigrated to Germany from Russia in the 1980s and early 1990s. It appears that works that remain geographically within the Soviet Union (failing to discuss resettlement) do not discuss repatriation either.[234] After the spring of 1944, the ethnic German experience became even more complicated: village groups became separated during flight in the winter of 1944 for example. As messy as it is to sort through the status of ethnic Germans after the war, to trace their post-war lives in Germany, their evasion of repatriation, and their eventual immigration, knowledge of this period is crucial to understanding ethnic German life after the war. Although the war was over, the struggles of ethnic Germans were not. They continued relying on an identity that could be ethnic German, Soviet, Russian, or even Dutch to achieve their goals.

Soviet Advancement

In the winter of 1944-1945 the Third Reich did not pay particular attention to its *Volksdeutsche* (now *Reichsdeutsche*) population as the country continued its downward spiral. The unimportance of ethnic Germans after the *VoMi*'s failed plans for Ukraine and Poland is shown through the lack of special assistance that they received during flight from the Soviet Army. The nearness of the eastern front in 1944-1945 caused

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[233] Ingeborg Fleischhauer, and Benjamin Pinkus, *The Soviet Germans: Past and Present* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986); Alexander Dallin, *German Rule in Russia, 1941-1945; A Study of Occupation Policies* (London: Macmillan, 1957).
[234] Richard Walth, *Flotsam of World History: The Germans from Russia between Stalin and Hitler* (Essen: Klartext-Verlag, 1996); Kate Brown, *A Biography of No Place: From Ethnic Borderland to Soviet Heartland* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2004).

uncertainty, panic, and a push to move westward away from the Red Army. Fear of the Soviet Army extended to all Germans, influenced by both Soviet and German propaganda. Soviet atrocities that occurred in the town of Nemmersdorf fueled Nazi propaganda.[235] German forces had lost the town to the Red Army only to retake the territory shortly afterward. During reoccupation soldiers found a number of civilians murdered by the Soviet Army; the German propaganda ministry photographed them, distributing the pictures and stating that similar atrocities would occur if Germans did not push the enemy back. Although heralding Soviet atrocities was intended to encourage civilians to remain in their towns and fight the enemy, it achieved the opposite response. Stories of Soviet rape, murder, and looting were retold by fleeing German refugees streaming east, creating panic in the towns they passed through and leading to increased numbers of refugees. The Soviet Union had developed their own propaganda against the Germans as well. Pamphlets cried, "The Germans are not human beings…We shall kill. If you have not killed at least one German a day, you have wasted that day…If you kill one German, kill another - for us there is nothing more joyful than a heap of German corpses."[236] From October 19, 1944 onward, the Red Army marched through German towns that held ethnic Germans who had once lived in the Soviet Union.[237]

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[235] Richard Bessel, *Germany 1945: From War to Peace* (NY: HarperCollins, 2009), 71.
[236] Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes, Bonn, Bestand Völkerrecht/Kriegsrecht, vol. 82/8. In Alfred de Zayas, *A Terrible Revenge: The Ethnic Cleansing of the East European Germans* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 40.
[237] Bessel, *Germany 1945*, 149.

While all Germans feared the Soviet Army, for ethnic Germans there was added danger. Ethnic Germans had a past that placed them in long-term as opposed to short-term peril. Not only were they susceptible to bodily harm, but they were still labeled Soviet citizens. Although the German government seemed to have forgotten them, ethnic Germans knew that the Soviets would not overlook their collaboration with the German Army. Their Soviet past would remain a source of fear and would factor in their decision to immigrate to North America in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

For ethnic Germans nervously living through the final months of the war, life was difficult. The Third Reich had once protected them from Soviet aggression through resettlement; now the failing nation no longer prioritized ethnic Germans. For those still in resettlement camps, there was little food. Lilly Zaft remembers her pregnant mother's anguished prayers that the next bomb would directly hit them ending their suffering from cold and hunger. Lilly's father and brother, while having evaded the army, were sent to dig trenches. Hunger pains drove seven-year old Lilly and her three younger siblings to eat snow.[238] A secret delivery of potatoes pushed through the camp's fence helped them stay alive.[239] Chortitzans both in Poland and the resettlement camps knew that soon they would have to flee again. The flight of ethnic Germans in January 1945, however, was very different from their trek in 1943; ethnic Germans, while no longer playing a role in Germany's plans, were not forgotten by the Soviet Union.[240]

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[238] Lilly Zaft. Interview with Author. Dec. 13, 2013. Mercersburg, PA.
[239] Lilly Zaft. Interview with Author. May 18, 2015. Mercersburg, PA.
[240] Marlene Epp, *Women without Men* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1999), 51.

The assistance ethnic Germans received in 1943 during *VoMi*-directed resettlement compared to evacuation and flight in 1945 reveals how ethnic Germans were mostly on their own at this point. If ethnic Germans had felt isolated during their trek from the Soviet Union during resettlement, they were in essence abandoned while fleeing from the Soviet Army. In 1943 their exodus from Ukraine had been a priority of a Nazi organization, the *VoMi*. Now the evacuation of Chortitzans was restricted like that of all other Germans. In January 1945, the Chortitzans in the Stargard Lager had been ready to leave for weeks. Upon order of the *kommandant,* the camp inhabitants had each packed one bag. Lilly's mother had carefully placed the last bits of dried fruit in each of her children's backpacks. The luggage was then taken to the Preußisch Stargard train station twenty-five miles from Danzig so that it would be ready when evacuation was permitted and a train became available to transport them westward. Limited transportation was finally available for evacuees; however, this was inadequate and secured by the most desperate. The Zafts traveled to Gotenhafen, a port city on the Baltic Sea, with thousands of other refugees in an attempt to board an evacuation ship after the German government finally lifted the death penalty for leaving the Danzig area.[241] When the Zafts tried to board the *Wilhelm Gustloff*, it was already filled beyond capacity. Many ethnic Germans were among the 10,573 able to obtain boarding passes.[242] The Zafts' inability to board probably spared their lives, though, as the *Wilhelm Gustloff* sank

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[241] Cathryn Prince, *Death in the Baltic: the World War II Sinking of the Wilhelm Gustloff* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 45.
[242] Ibid., 14, 17.

in the Baltic Sea on January 30, 1945 sending eighty-eight percent of its passengers to their death.[243] For the thousands who died, evacuation had failed to result in safety.

Returning to the camp, the Zaft family and the rest of the residents still there pressed the camp *kommandant* and town mayor to provide them with permission and means for distancing themselves from the approaching Soviet Army.[244] Panicked flight resulted when town dwellers were finally given permission to leave or told the truth as to how close the Soviet soldiers were.[245] Town mayors and villagers alike believed that the German Army would cause the Soviets to turn in retreat: "People are still beguiled by that old victory self confidence that minimizes setbacks," wrote Neufeld regarding rumors of German victories.[246] It was impossible, however, to deny the closeness of the front when startled by retreating troops, gunfire, and fleeing refugees. Awoken in the middle of the night, William Henry Hann of Chortitza hurriedly roused his sisters who did not want to leave the city of Lask, Poland, for fear that their husbands fighting at the front would not know where to find them. Procuring a wagon, he loaded his family including his sisters onto it and fled westward with a group of twenty-eight individuals from the local Seventh-day Adventist congregation. During the trip, two Mennonite women from Chortitza and their children joined the group that soon totaled forty

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[243] Wilhelm Gustloff Museum, 2010. http://wilhelmgustloffmuseum.com/introduction.html (accessed Dec. 2, 2014).

[244] Bessel, *Germany 1945,* 88. No one was allowed to leave their town and certainly not a resettlement camp without permission to keep the roads clear for military traffic and prevent mass panic.

[245] It is true that those who did not have any evacuation restrictions placed upon themselves did not always want to leave either as seen in the case of Maria's family.

[246] Jacob Neufeld, *Path of Thorns: Soviet Mennonite Life Under Communist and Nazi Rule* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2014), 307.

persons. People began leaving their homes and farms by their own volition. As the number of refugees passing by the Kreiser family's Polish farm increased daily, they debated whether or not to leave, remembering the difficulties of the Great Trek. Finally deciding to depart, after their daughter reminded them that they had overcome the difficult resettlement journey, they boarded the last train leaving the area.[247] Jacob Neufeld and seventy Mennonite families from the settlement east of Chortitza also departed from their Polish homes.[248] In spite of the chaos, village groups did their best to stay together.

Train transportation finally became available for those in the Neustadt resettlement camp, and the Chortitza Germans settled into boxcars with a few of their belongings, the little food and water they had, and the extreme cold. They left as evacuees although they would soon become refugees for "almost nowhere did a timely and organized evacuation take place, on the contrary, the departure of the East Prussian population constituted a disorderly flight which was triggered at the last moment and was completely chaotic."[249] The main purpose in leaving was to protect themselves from physical assault, imprisonment, and repatriation by the Soviet troops. Memoirs and other accounts from this time all connect the unrelenting drive of ethnic Germans to fear of being caught by the Soviet Army. They knew they would be considered traitors and

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[247] Maria Kreiser, *Though my Soul more Bent*, 61.
[248] Jacob Neufeld, *Path of Thorns*, 309.
[249] *Der Vertriebung der deutschen Bevoelkderung asu den Gebieten oestlich der Oder-DeiBe,* vol. I/1, 'einleitung', p. 33E. In Bessel, *Germany 1945* 73.

punished as such if found.[250] This encouraged the refugees to do whatever they could to escape, including climbing through windows into crowded trains or whipping their horses.[251]

The trip was difficult for those fleeing on foot and in wagons. "Little did we know," stated William Hann "that this trip ahead of us would be a thousand miles at least and more than two months traveling."[252] Not only would this journey be as long as the trek from Ukraine, but it would be without the aid of German soldiers, food at trek-staging posts, or a trek leader. Instead, as Hann recounts, "During all this turmoil we had lost the senses of south, east, north, west, and remember, we were unprepared…But we went with the masses, straight ahead."[253] Neufeld also remembered the chaos of January 20, 1945.[254]

> Roads are jammed with thousands of wagons that press forward helter skelter or stop and wait. Military units appear out of nowhere blocking movement. Suddenly we hear cannon thunder nearby. Well now, how can that be? Where does it come from? The roads are jammed and motionless.[255]

Yet, as another refugee recounted, with "[t]he fighter planes above us, the deep snow underneath us, the Russians behind us, and the lagoon in front of us" it was now a matter

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[250] Neufeld, *Path of Thorns*; Holland, *Gone Without a Trace*; Maria Kreiser, *Though My Soul More Bent*; John Philipps, *The Tragedy of the Soviet Germans*; Connie Braun, *The Steppes are the Colour of Sepia*.
[251] William Henry Hann, *The Grizzly Bear of Russia* (n.p. 1992), 81.
[252] Hann, *The Grizzly Bear of Russia,* 79.
[253] Ibid., 80.
[254] Ethnic Germans who had been resettled in the Warthegau (670,000) left between January 20 and January 23. They had also been restrained from departing by the Nazi Party leaders. Bessel, *Germany 1945,* 80.
[255] Hann, *The Grizzly Bear of Russia,* 311.

of survival.[256] While many refugees were caught by the advancing Soviets, others successfully reached southern Germany or Berlin where they waited for the end of the war.

Legal Definition of Ethnic Germans

By definition of German Federal Expellee Law, ethnic Germans from the Soviet Union who had been resettled by the Nazis were expellees. They were not (or at least should not have been) titled Displaced Persons; only Displaced Persons fell under the jurisdiction of the United Nations. Instead, their ethnic German heritage that was recognized prior to the beginning of the war placed them under the care of the German government despite their previous Soviet citizenship. This was because they were *Umsiedler*, persons who had become refugees in the winter and spring of 1945 in an effort to flee the approaching Soviet Army.[257] The term "expellees" included *Volksdeutsche, Reichsdeutsche,* and *Sudetendeutsche*.[258]

The legal status of ethnic Germans is important because it holds the key to their post-war experiences in Germany, their eligibility for repatriation, their ability to integrate into German society, and their opportunities to immigrate. Ethnic Germans were eligible for repatriation even though they fell under the category of expellee which identified them as Germans. Chortitzans and other ethnic Germans had received their

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[256] Erika Vora, *Silent No More: Personal Narratives of German Women who Survived WWII Expulsion and Deportation* (US: Xlibris Corporation, 2012), 354.
[257] "Umsiedler," GAMEO, http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Umsiedler_(Aussiedler) (accessed Dec. 15, 2015).
[258] Hans W. Schoenberg, *Germans from the East; A Study of Their Migration, Resettlement and Subsequent Group History Since 1945* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1971). Few Chortitza Germans remained on their farms in Poland long enough to be expelled by the Poles after the war or the Soviet soldiers during post-war population transfers.

German citizenship after the beginning of World War II. Before September 1, 1939, they were Soviet citizens with their nationality identified as "German." Even though many *Volksdeustche* had received new passports and paperwork when they were brought back to the Reich in 1943, the Soviet Union chose not to recognize their German citizenship since it was issued after September 1, 1939. Therefore, because their German citizenship was not recognized, the Soviet Union included them in their post-war repatriation attempts.[259] With the fall of the Third Reich, ethnic Germans from Chortitza knew that other governments did not recognize their German citizenship.[260] After the war, the agreed upon definition of a "Soviet citizen" was "a person born or resident within the pre-September 1, 1939, boundaries of Russia (who had not acquired another nationality – or a Nansen passport, which would render the subject Stateless) …"[261]

Ethnic Germans from Chortitza and elsewhere in the Soviet Union understood the difficulty of contesting their status as eligible repatriates. They were only able to escape repatriation by physically avoiding it or by claiming a different identity; there was simply too much evidence in the form of identification papers, camp records, and ration cards that attested to their previous status as Soviet citizens through birthplace. The identification papers of the Chortitza Germans, even while stating that they were

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[259] Epp, *Women without Men,* 54.
[260] Kreiser, *Though My Soul More Bent,* 86. William Hann saw this evidenced by the fact that everyone called them Russians. Hann, *The Grizzly Bear of Russia.*
[261] Nikolai Tolstoy, *The Secret Betrayal*. Reviewed by Charles Lutton in *The Journal of Historical Review* 1, no. 4 (winter 1980): 371-376. http://www.ihr.org/jhr/v1/v1n4p371_lutton.html Germans from Chortitza were not stateless because even while they denied their prior Soviet citizenship, they had a German nationality. Mark Elliott, "The United States and Forced Repatriation of Soviet Citizens, 1944-47" *Political Science Quarterly* 88, no. 2 (June 1973): 272.

German citizens, still had birthplaces and residences that bore Ukrainian and Russian names.

While Soviet identity made them eligible for repatriation, during the spring of 1945 before the war ended and repatriation plans were fully carried out, ethnic Germans at times were able to use their Soviet background to their advantage. By naming their Soviet birthplaces, those from Chortitza had an advantage over their German neighbors by adopting Russian or Ukrainian identities as long as they did not identify as German-Soviet. For instance, while traveling as refugees through Soviet-occupied territory in Germany, Maria Kreiser and her father were approached by two Russian soldiers who wanted to rape her. Her father's pleas in Russian convinced the soldiers to leave them alone until they realized that they were Soviet-Germans. Then their lust turned into "duty" as they shouted it was their job to destroy the Fascists. Only the girl's screams in broken Russian that she was Ukrainian saved her from being raped.[262] For the Letkemann family, on the other hand, they were able to maintain that they were purely Russian and not Soviet-German. During a partisan attack in Yugoslavia, claiming to be Russian placed them as allies with the partisans (saving them from death) because of Tito and Stalin's political relationship.[263] Later, Jakob Letkemann's purposeful wearing of a Russian tunic enabled him to successfully bypass Soviet soldiers in bringing aid to German POWs left to die along the road in their village.[264] It was important, however, to

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[262] Kreiser, *Though My More Soul Bent*, 76.
[263] Connie Braun, *The Steppes are the Color of Sepia: A Memoir* (Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2008), 150.
[264] Ibid., 166.

correctly guess when to assume a Russian identity and when to identify as German.[265] Failure to do so would result in dire consequences.

Because Soviet repatriation attempt continued until the spring of 1949, and because of the continued construction on the Inner-German Border those from Chortitza had to leave the Soviet Zone to find safety.[266] These legal boundaries affected the future of the 370,000 resettled ethnic Germans from the USSR; 280,000 of them were repatriated and the remaining 90,000 managed to actively evade repatriation.[267] In the autumn and winter of 1945, 203,706 ethnic Germans who had once lived in the Soviet Union were taken to special settlements at Krasnoyarsk Kray in Siberia.[268] The number of total repatriated ethnic Germans would reach two million.[269]

Soviet Repatriation Goals

As people and armies, territory and borders were sorted out after the war, the Soviet Union placed special emphasis upon the return of its citizens. While POWs, military personnel, and *Ostarbeiter* were targeted for repatriation, there was a disproportionate number of ethnic Germans recalled to the motherland.[270] These non-Russians included the ethnic Germans from Chortitza and other villages in Russia and

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[265] Braun, *The Steppes are the Color of Sepia*, 163.
[266] Mark Elliott, *Pawns of Yalta*: *Soviet Refugees and America's Role in Their Repatriation* (Urbana, Ill: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 122.
[267] Gerhard Reichling, *Die deutschen Vertriebenen in Zahlen*, part 1 (Bonn: 1995), 44–59. Other statistics cite 280,000 repatriated Soviet Germans with only 70,000 escaping the grasp of the Red Army. Epp, *Women without Men*, 54.
[268] Pohl, *Ethnic Cleansing in the USSR*, 46. Pavel Polian, *Against their Will: The History and Geography of Forced Migrations in the USSR* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2004), 188. Ethnographer Karl Stumpp stated that there were 200,000 Germans from Russia who, in 1945, were taken back to the Soviet Union. The numbers seem to fluctuate. Karl Stumpp, *The German-Russians: Two Centuries of Pioneering* (Bonn: Atlantic-Edition Forum, 1967), 130.
[269] Pohl, *Ethnic Cleansing in the USSR*, 46.
[270] Elliott, *Pawns of Yalta*, 96.

Ukraine. What then had given the Soviet Union permission to repatriate citizens in the first place? The Yalta Agreement stipulated that all "who have been identified as Soviet Citizens to the satisfaction of the Military Authorities" were to be returned to the Soviet Union, therefore enabling the Soviet Union to take back all those they could claim.[271] The Soviet Union had its own reasons for these repatriations. Historian Gerald Cohen cited a need for manpower as one of the main reasons the Soviet Union desired to reclaim its people and "renationalize" them.[272] The Federal Republic of Germany used these repatriations as propaganda to show "the violent arbitrariness of the expulsions and pointed at the USSR and its East European satellites as the primary culprits behind the forced removals."[273] Yet, once the Allies saw the unwillingness of those being repatriated, they began to limit the ability of Soviet officials' forays into other occupation zones.[274] Of course, the beginnings of the Cold War contributed to the distrust between Americans, British, and Soviets.

The Allies also participated in returning individuals to the Soviet Union - one out of every ten they helped repatriate was an ethnic German.[275] The Americans, French, and British participated in the repatriation of ethnic Germans for several reasons. First, they had numerous refugees that they needed to feed and house within their occupation

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[271] Irina Mukhina, "'The Forgotten History': Ethnic German Women in Soviet Exile, 1941-1955" *Europe-Asia Studies* 57, no. 5 (July 2005): 734. "Top Secret report of the British Control Commissioner for Germany at Lubbecke dated 11 August 1945," as published in Carol Mather, *Aftermath of War: Everyone Must Go Home* (London: Brassy's, 1992), 20-21.
[272] Gerald Daniel Cohen, *In War's Wake: Europe's Displaced Persons in the Postwar Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 23.
[273] Pertti Ahonen, "On Forced Migrations: Transnational Realities and National Narratives in Post-1945 (West) Germany" *German History* 32, no. 4 (Dec. 2014): 603.
[274] Mark Elliot, "The Soviet Repatriation Campaign" in *The Refugee Experience,* 351.
[275] Pohl, *Ethnic Cleansing in the USSR,* 46.

zones. The Soviet Union transporting hundreds of thousands of refugees back to the Soviet Union would ease some of this burden off them. The second reason was that some feared that refugees and displaced persons were carrying diseases that would lead to epidemics similar to those after World War I. Lastly, there were fears that refugees would not stay confined in their camps and instead would participate in criminal activity as the following quote by an American officer attests.[276]

> Through no fault of his own the DP makes a poor outward impression on an MG (military government) officer as he attempts to present his case. His 'home' is actually a barracks schoolhouse or barn and, usually, with common sanitary facilities. His wardrobe is usually what he wears plus a few pieces of clothing stuffed in a bag. He has developed a defensive attitude as protection against German brutality. He has learned to steal to supplement the German starvation diet. He has learned to distrust promises and pieces of paper. His world revolves around food and shelter.[277]

What remained of Germany did not seem to care about its ethnic Germans. The Third Reich had wanted their assistance with the Holocaust and their pure Aryan blood. Now that those plans had failed and the *VoMi* collapsed, Germany had no need for individuals who would be additional burdens on the country and did not quite fit in German society.

The Process of Repatriation

Even though ethnic Germans were intimately acquainted with destruction, death, and separation, and although their future in Germany was bleak, they still abhorred repatriation. Ella Schneider, a Volga German, wrote how she and the other refugees at

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[276] Richard Bessel, *Germany 1945*, 258-259.
[277] American Officer, "Displaced Person Camps" http://www.dpcamps.org/repatriation.html (accessed Nov. 6, 2015).

Camp Hofstetten in Germany viewed repatriation worse than death.[278] "In fact," she stated, "women made plans to kill themselves and their families rather than go back to the Communists."[279] Negative interactions with the Soviet government during the past two decades had not only resulted in willingness to resettle but a desire to avoid repatriation. Ethnic Germans remembered the relatives that had been arrested and deported to labor camps and the property that had been taken away during collectivization. Stories of Soviet soldiers committing atrocities toward women were widespread as it became known that the promises of reunion with family, return to their home villages, and forgiveness for collaboration were all lies.[280] Repatriates would not be returning home or reunited with husbands and families but would be taken to labor camps.[281]

The records available to Soviet officials betrayed ethnic Germans for repatriation. Ethnic German John Philipps attests that the resettlement camp records that German officials collected upon their arrival in 1943 later fell into the hands of the Soviets. These records included lists of camp inhabitants including the Ukrainian villages they came from.[282] In addition, EWZ records had the applicant's birthplace in the Soviet Union, the birthplaces of their spouse, parents, and in-laws (which was almost always Soviet as well), and a list of previous residences (all in the Soviet Union). In the Soviet Zone, occupants of each town were required to register with the town mayor. In

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[278] Ella E. Schneider Hilton, *Displaced Person: A Girl's Life in Russia, Germany, and America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004), 113.
[279] Ibid.
[280] Irina Mukhina, *The Germans of the Soviet Union* (London: Routledge, 2007), 50.
[281] Ibid., 49.
[282] John Philipps, *The Tragedy of the Soviet Germans: A Story of Survival* (n.p., 1983), 142.

an interview, Barbara Mayer stated that everyone in her village of Steigra (in Saxony-Anhalt, Germany) knew that she and her refugee family were Soviet-Germans; it was impossible to hide this portion of her identity, she claimed.[283] Registering for food ration cards might also expose one's identity. In Wildenreuth, Germany where the Hann family had settled after fleeing Poland, the town mayor composed and presented to KGB agents a list of at least twenty people in their town who were Soviet-Germans.[284] In Alleringersleben, Germany officials required each family to post on the outside of their door a list of all inhabitants inside with their birthplace information.[285] In addition to birthplace, an individual could be identified as a former Soviet citizen by speaking Russian or Ukrainian. Even a different hairstyle or accent might expose an ethnic German's identity. In Alsace-Lorraine at the end of the war, Justina Neufeld was approached by a Russian repatriation officer. Seeing her non-French hairstyle, he inquired if she had been born in Russia. She unknowingly registered herself and her brother's family for repatriation by agreeing that she would like to be reunited with the rest of her family. She provided the official at the Soviet repatriation headquarters her address of residence, birthplace, and name. Only her brother's bribe and false French citizenship papers saved them from being placed on the next transport back to the Soviet Union.[286] Other Soviet tactics included Allied cooperation, forcible removal, and propaganda.[287]

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[283] Holland, *Gone Without a Trace,* 131.
[284] Hann, *The Grizzly Bear of Russia,* 98.
[285] Lilly Zaft. Skype interview with Author. Nov. 27, 2015.
[286] J. Neufeld, *A Family Torn Apart,* 144-145.
[287] Elliot, *Pawns of Yalta,* 137.

The vulnerable placement of ethnic Germans contributed to their repatriation. At the end of the war in the spring of 1945, many ethnic Germans were purposefully located on the fringes of Germany where they had been in resettlement camps or on farms. About 200,000 ethnic Germans were repatriated from these locations.[288] Soviet officials found an additional 80,000 ethnic Germans in the interior of Germany.[289] Many ethnic Germans who were in the interior of the country at the end of the war were those who had fled Poland during the Red Army's advances in January 1945 and had been in refugee camps. A.J. Kroeker from Chortitza described how the refugee camp where he stayed in late spring 1945 while waiting to immigrate to Canada "was overrun by Russians"; however, he evaded capture.[290] Alma Hessler-Wenske, an ethnic German from Odessa who was evacuated by the German Army in 1943, searched for relatives in Germany at the close of the war. When she arrived at the refugee camp where they had been staying, she discovered that the day before she arrived, her relatives had been repatriated back to the Soviet Union.[291] A Mennonite lady from Chortitza related how even though her brother evaded capture during the 1930s, "[a]fter the war, most of the family made its way to Belgrade, where the Red Army picked them up and sent them into Soviet exile, each family member to a different location."[292] Even when proof of Soviet citizenship was lacking, officials were able to use the vague wording of the Yalta

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[288] Ingeborg Fleischhauer, and Benjamin Pinkus, *The Soviet Germans: Past and Present* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 101.
[289] Ibid.
[290] A.J. Kroeker, *First Mennonite Villages in Russia 1789-1943* (Cloverdale, B.C.: D.W. Friesen & Sons, 1981), 236.
[291] Alma Hessler-Wenske, Interview with Marion Weidemann,Winsen, Germany. August 22, 2014.
[292] David G. Rempel, and Cornelia Rempel Carlson. *A Mennonite Family in Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union, 1789-1923* (Toronto: University of Toronto press, 2002), 255.

Agreement which stated that the person only had to be identified as a Soviet citizen in order to be repatriated.[293]

Escape from Repatriation

Accounts of ethnic Germans escaping from Soviet officials reveal the use of their malleable identity. One way to alter an identity was to create false identification papers. The Neufelds paid a large amount of money to receive false French citizenship papers.[294] The Zafts, on the other hand, made their own papers, using a potato to create the official stamp. These papers did not change their country of citizenship (Germany), but it did change their birthplaces from Ukraine to East Prussia. They were still considered refugees, but they were no longer Soviet citizens.[295] The friendship Lilly's father had cultivated with the town mayor helped convince him to sign the false papers validating them. It was this same mayor that alerted the Zafts to the Soviets' requests for a number of large trucks; they believed this to mean that the town's inhabitants would be transported to the Soviet Union.[296] Other ethnic Germans creatively took advantage of ambiguity. For instance, one individual listed his birthplace as Speyer without listing if it was Speyer, Germany or Speyer, Ukraine enabling him to assume a flexible identity when needed.[297] Another ethnic German genuinely lost all of his identification papers,

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[293] Mukhina, *The Germans of the Soviet Union*, 51.
[294] Neufeld, *A Family Torn Apart* 146.
[295] Whether a West Prussian birthplace protected them from the occupying Soviets is hard to tell. However, it did help them immigrate later to North America.
[296] Lilly Zaft, Transcript of Interview with Author, Mercersburg, PA. Dec. 15, 2013.
[297] Philipps, *The Tragedy of the Soviet Germans,* 155.

and the occupation zones often made it difficult to confirm whether or not one was telling the truth when filling out new papers.[298]

Use of the Past

The most elaborate example of a malleable identity was the adoption of an entirely new one. A group of 618 ethnic Germans had left the Chortitza village of Nieder-Chortitza in 1943 for resettlement to the Reich. In August 1945, the remaining thirty-three of them appeared at the Dutch border claiming eligibility for entrance based on ancestry explaining that their ancestors had emigrated from Holland to the German States before arriving in Russia.[299] In order to safely remove them from the reach of the Soviets, Mennonite Peter Dyck in charge of European refugee operations appealed to the Dutch government. He asked that they allow German-Russian Mennonites to enter the country for asylum. Although the group of ethnic Germans who first settled Chortitza and other Mennonite settlements in Ukraine came from Danzig and West Prussia, their ancestors had originally emigrated from the Netherlands. He argued that the Mennonites who had been resettled in Germany from the Soviet Union were, therefore, actually Dutch. This argument had proven successful. Earlier, claiming Dutch ancestry had facilitated the immigration of 22,000 German Mennonites from Russia in the 1920s.[300] The Mennonite Central Committee's argument about Dutch ancestry found its base not only in precedent but in arguing that German-Russian Mennonite last names were linked

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[298] Bessel, *Germany 1945,* 272.
[299] Homan, "'We have Come to Love Them': Russian Mennonite Refugees in the Netherlands," 41.
[300] T.D. Regehr, "Of Dutch or German Ancestry?: Mennonite Refugees, MCC, and the International Refugee Organization" *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 13 (1995): 9.

to the Netherlands. They also used the hardships they had experienced in the German States and the Soviet Union to argue that they had never assimilated and had always been unhappy there; now they were coming home to Holland.[301] Regarding the examination of the group of thirty three from Nieder-Chortitza, author Homan explained that they "passed the test" and were admitted because "experts" deemed their language to be that of Dutch extraction.[302] In response to questions about their acceptance of German citizenship, they argued that in fact German-Russian Mennonites did not have a choice in accepting German citizenship or that they had only accepted it to escape Soviet reprisals toward them if they had stayed in the Soviet Union. The IRO was not easily convinced by the argument that ethnic Germans from Chortitza and other Mennonite settlements in the Soviet Union were, in fact, different from other non-Mennonite ethnic Germans. They refused to believe that these Mennonites had not willingly participated as perpetrators in the Holocaust.[303] In fact, the IRO, goaded by the Soviets to investigate these claims of innocence, did their own research. Captured German War Records revealed that ethnic German Mennonites were not guiltless; some had signed up for military service or requested German citizenship without being coerced.[304] Yet, the rebuttals of Mennonite scholars, the lobbying of the MCC, and the lack of official IRO recognition of Mennonite complicity led to the Dutch government agreeing to a limited number of Mennonite immigrants. The MCC believed in the necessity of physically

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[301] Regehr, "Of Dutch or German Ancestry?" 13. It is true that Low German is more similar to Dutch than High German.
[302] Homan, "'We have Come to Love Them': Russian Mennonite Refugees in the Netherlands," 42. Their knowledge of Platt Deutsch in addition to High German helped with the convincing.
[303] Regehr, "Of Dutch or German Ancestry?" 12.
[304] Ibid., 15.

transporting ethnic German Mennonites who had previously lived in the Soviet Union out of danger. Claiming Dutch identity would prove effective in enabling ethnic German Mennonites to escape repatriation. Justina Neufeld and her brother's family from the ethnic German village of Gnadenfeld had nearly been repatriated while in France. Realizing that they could not stay in Alsace-Lorraine any longer, they left for the Netherlands with the help of Peter Dyck in October 1945.[305]

Many church organizations helped sponsor immigrants at this time like Church World Service. Originally sent on a humanitarian mission to Germany to aid in the post-war rebuilding of Germany, Dyck became the hero of many Chortitza Germans trying to avoid repatriation. Not only did Dyck representing the MCC help with the logistics of transportation across the Holland border, but he was a mediator for them, convincing border guards to let them into the country, providing housing once they arrived in Holland, and securing immigration opportunities to South America, Canada, and the United States. Religious identity, in this case, served as a means of pushing back against the state (both the Netherlands and the Soviet Union). Ethnic German Mennonites had an advocate through their membership in a worldwide religious community. Despite their ever-changing ethnic identity, their religious affiliation did not fluctuate, even when they had been unable to practice their Mennonite faith freely.

The desire to be admitted to a country where they would be safe from repatriation threats was the initial reason for ethnic German Mennonites from Chortitza to use the MCC as a mediator. A secondary motive, which was also very important, was

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[305] Homan, "'We have Come to Love Them': Russian Mennonite Refugees in the Netherlands," 45.

to be viewed by the IRO and other United Nations organizations as refugees eligible for UN aid. This assistance included admittance to refugee camps, medical examinations for immigration, and reimbursement of immigration travel costs.

Physical Movement

Borders changed around individuals as well. Many refugees thought they were far enough west to be out of the reach of the Soviet Union. When Germany was divided into occupation zones, the Zafts found to their dismay that they were within the Soviet Zone one kilometer away from the Inner-German border. Without physically moving, the Potsdam Agreement had decided whose jurisdiction the Zafts would be under. One third of ethnic German resettlers found themselves in the Soviet Zone.[306] Living conditions were still difficult and Soviet efforts to provide for the ethnic German refugees did not trump the fears that many still held concerning repatriation.[307]

For those in the Soviet Zone who had no desire to return to the Soviet Union, crossing the border was a hope they held on to. With the help of a border guard, Lilly Zaft's father successfully transferred his wife, seven children, and disabled sister from the Soviet Zone into the British Zone in September 1946. As a ten year old, Lilly Zaft remembers a feeling of freedom as she passed through "No Man's Land" - a place she believed belonged to no nation or army that could dictate her actions. Other Mennonites from Chortitza bribed border guards with alcohol, jewelry including wedding rings, and

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[306] John C. Swanson, *The Second World War and its Aftermath* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2008), 355.
[307] Philip Ther, "Expellee Policy in the Soviet Zone and the GDR" In *Coming Home to Germany? The Integration of Ethnic Germans from Central and Eastern Europe in the Federal Republic* ed. David Rock and Stefan Wolff (New York: Berghan Books, 2002), 62-63.

cigarettes.[308] Women, especially, were able to cross the border easier than men, with a mother and daughter even returning to the Soviet Zone to bring their sewing machine over.[309] While not as common, stories do exist of individuals escaping from Soviet repatriation camps either because once they arrived there they learned of their true fate or because they had been brought there against their will. Methods of escape involved performing sexual favors for guards, being obstinate and simply refusing to return to the Soviet Union, and smuggling individuals out of the camps by disguising them.[310]

While being the British Zone was safer than the Soviet Zone, nowhere was completely safe. Even those who were in the British, French, or American Zones were still subject to repatriation. The Jakob Neufelds were encouraged to flee from the British Zone when British soldiers and Soviet officials tried to repatriate the dozens of Mennonites from Ukraine living in the neighboring town.[311] William Hann from Chortitza heard that a list of ethnic Germans was going to be given to KGB agents by the town's mayor; Hann spoke to the military governor in Weiden who promised that he would not allow them to be repatriated against their will. Nevertheless, the military governor strongly suggested that the Hann family immigrate to America because soon the area would no longer be under American jurisdiction and at that time he would not be able to protect them.[312] Regardless of where one found himself at the end of the war, there was the fear and possibility of being sent back to the Soviet Union from any of the

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[308] Epp, *Women without Men,* 56.
[309] Ibid., 57.
[310] Ibid., 58, 62.
[311] Neufeld, *Path of Thorns,* 354.
[312] Hann, *The Grizzly Bear of Russia*, 98-99.

four occupation zones. This knowledge not only encouraged many to try to immigrate but convinced some of the hopelessness of trying to escape, so that they turned themselves in to repatriation officials.

Those who were repatriated had already undergone the difficulties of resettling from Ukraine to Poland; now, they once again experienced lack of food, water, heat, and hygiene facilities while being taken back to the Soviet Union.[313] Some ethnic Germans returned on their own despite fears that repatriation would result in forced labor, punishment, and death. Voluntary return was often the result of believing Soviet propaganda and wanting to be reunited with family members.[314] The Toews family, the friends of the Letkemanns who had navigated the war with them, decided to return to Ukraine.[315] Others believed the Soviet government's promise that they could return to their homes.[316] The two women from Chortitza who had joined William Hann's wagon train decided that they would rather be repatriated than continue as refugees.[317] Albert Kampen decided that he wanted to return to the "motherland" where he became a soldier in the Soviet Army; his brother David also settled in the Soviet Union after his release as a prisoner of war.[318]

The Soviet government assured ethnic Germans that Soviet citizens would not be held accountable for their delayed return to the Soviet Union.[319] "All freed Soviet people

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[313] Mukhina, *The Germans of the Soviet Union*, 49.
[314] Braun, *The Steppes are the Color of Sepia*, 182.
[315] Ibid., 181.
[316] Ibid.
[317] Hann, *The Grizzly Bear of Russia*, 90.
[318] Stephen A. Kampen, *Resting in God Alone* (second edition), 17.
[319] Elliott, *Pawns of Yalta*, 148.

are received in their homeland not with contempt or distrust but with consideration, warm encouragement, and affectionate sympathy" if "they honestly fulfill their duties on their return."[320] Other refugees received glowing letters from family members detailing how wonderful life was at home in the Soviet Union and that they should return to join them. The deception of Soviet repatriation officials was uncovered when one refugee who received such a letter from his father attested that his father had died ten years earlier.[321] There was even a periodical published by the Committee for the Return to the Homeland that tried to convince Soviet people to come "home."[322] They pointed out that conditions in war-torn Europe were not the best, that they were still living in DP camps as refugees, and that they had no future there. One writer stated, "Like a beacon, the Committee pointed out to the displaced the path to their native shores."[323] Yet, Marlene Epp terms these ethnic Germans who allowed themselves to be repatriated as being "bewitched" through believing the lies of the Soviet Union's government.[324] Alexander Dallin summed up the dichotomy of repatriation when he wrote of some "going home" to the Soviet Union while for others returning meant "forced repatriation, cruel surrender, death, or hiding."[325]

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[320] Nikolai F. Brychev, *Domoi, na rodinu!,* (Moscow: Voennoe Izdatel'stvo, 1945), 10. In Elliott, *Pawns of Yalta* 148. "Repatriation of DPs from Germany and Austria," NAS RG 165. WDGSS, Military Intelligence Service Project File, no. 2897, 1 Mar. 1946. In Elliott, *Pawns of Yalta* 148.
[321] Elliott, *Pawns of Yalta,* 144.
[322] Ibid., 135.
[323] Briukhanov, *Vot kak eto bylo* 203. In Yury Boshyk, Wsevolod W. Isajiw, and Roman Senkus, *The Refugee Experience: Ukrainian Displaced Persons after World War Two* (Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, University of Alberta, 1992), 352.
[324] Marlene Epp, *Women without Men* 63.
[325] Alexander Dallin, *German Rule in Russia 1941-1945: A Study of Occupation Tactics* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1981), 659.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSIONS

Ethnic Germans born in Ukraine changed their identity many times during the war. Even after being resettled in the Reich, surviving the war, and escaping from the Soviet Zone, they still continued to choose how to present themselves based on the circumstances. The change in outward identity from German to Russian seen after the war in western Germany was not the result of fear.[326] Instead, it was an attempt to immigrate sooner than those who maintained their status as expellees.

Post-war Life

Post-war life as refugees in camps like Espelkamp or towns like Diepholz and Rehden were opportunities for families and friends to regroup, assess their losses from the war, and begin to plan for their futures.[327] Espelkamp was a camp built on a former German munitions storage area. Closely affiliated with the Mennonite church, Espelkamp grew through the service of Mennonite relief workers. Alice Snyder, a

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[326] It is too simplistic to state that ethnic Germans changed their identity based on the prevailing circumstances. For the Volga Germans and other ethnic German communities who truly tried to fit into Soviet culture and society in order to prove their loyalty, it can be said that there was a change in identity. For other ethnic Germans, however, especially after the war with the falsification of identification papers, it is more accurate to state that any "change" in identity was merely outward and temporary not internal or permanent.

[327] Espelkamp, Diepholz, and Rehden are three towns located in the beautiful flat countryside of northern Germany. Rehden is a village ten kilometers from Diepholz, the district's capital. Diepholz is located forty kilometers from Espelkamp. A two hour train ride from the former Inner-German border, these towns saw many war-weary and homeless individuals pass through. The towns are also interconnected. Individuals fleeing the Soviet Zone got off the train at Diepholz (Rehden does not have a station) and from there wandered into neighboring villages like Rehden that supported a number of refugees. Mennonites from Espelkamp would routinely visit Rehden to offer Bible studies with adults and provide religious instruction to refugee children living there. Lilly Zaft. Interview with Author. Mercersburg, Penn. Jan. 3, 2016. Kenneth Yoder. Interview with Author. Grantsville, Maryland. July 3, 2015. Orsel Schoepke. Interview with Author. Rehden, Germany. May 28, 2015.

Mennonite relief worker, noted in her December 14, 1948 diary entry the beginnings of Espelkamp as a place where the "living [was] pretty rough."[328] The "Pax Boys," young men affiliated with the Pax Project, helped improve living conditions though. The Pax Project was a program of the Mennonite church from 1951 to 1976 as a form of alternative service for conscientious objectors. The Mennonite individuals helping build up Espelkamp arrived in April 1951 as part of the I-W program under the Universal Military Training and Service Act. To Espelkamp would also come ethnic Germans who once lived in Ukraine, had left the Soviet Zone, and were trying to establish their lives in West Germany.

The living conditions after the war were still lower than the quality of life experienced under German occupation in Ukraine or what had been hoped for during resettlement in the Reich. Germany as a whole was suffering from an infrastructure destroyed by war. Many buildings were no longer inhabitable from bombing raids. To adequately house the millions of refugees streaming into Germany from the east was impossible. Located in the woods a short walk from the village of Rehden are cement bunkers where refugees and expellee families lived. The lack of electricity, running water, or hygiene facilities made living in the cramped dark spaces nearly unbearable. A dairy barn located on the edge of Rehden is still remembered as once housing refugee families on the second and third floors above the milk cows.[329] These conditions were

[328] Lucille Marr, *Alice Snyder's Letters from Germany* (Kitchener, Ontario: Pandora Press, 2009), 135.
[329] Orsel Schoepke. Interview with Author. Rehden, Germany. May 19, 2015.

not unique to Rehden. Even Espelkamp had no running water at first.[330] Families who had been assigned to a room or two in someone else's house enjoyed slightly better living conditions although they often had to deal with the feeling of not being welcomed by their host family. The Diepholz mayor would announce in the town's newspaper that on a certain day house inspections would occur to determine whether or not families had extra rooms that could house refugees.[331] These visits which left the home owner with little choice but to comply contributed to the feelings of hostility toward refugees.[332]

Notwithstanding the low standard of living, camps were an integral part of the immigration experience, however, and an important tool in helping people reassemble their lives after the war. The Mennonite church established two different refugee camps - one along the Dutch border and one in Stuttgart. They were established after a trainload of German-Russian Mennonites was barred from entering Holland. Denied assistance from the United Nations, the Mennonite church provided for their needs. At times, the camp in Gronau along the Dutch border contained 2,000 people, one sixth of all Mennonites who survived repatriation attempts and were now in Germany.[333]

Immigration Plans

As news of immigration opportunities filtered through towns, villages, and camps, ethnic German families began planning to immigrate. Yet, often the status granted to refugees or expellees by the International Refugee Organization dictated

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[330] Marr, *Alice Snyder's Letters from Germany*, 159.
[331] "Wohnraumbestsandsaufnahme" *Amtlicher Anzeiger* no. 14. March 28, 1947.
[332] Yet at the same time, articles in the Diepholz newspaper ask for donations for refugees including assistance for refugees. "Flüchtlingswäscherei" *Amtlicher Anzeiger* no. 11, pg 4. March 14, 1947.
[333] T.D. Regehr, "Of Dutch or German Ancestry?: Mennonite Refugees, MCC, and the International Refugee Organization " *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 13 (1995), 7, 10

whether one was able to immigrate or not. Because so many people crossed the Inner-German Border, refugee status was for those fleeing for political reasons and not economic ones. In fact, refugees had to prove their political persecution.[334] A United Nations conference held in 1951 designated refugees as those fleeing before January 1, 1951 due to a '"well founded fear of persecution."'[335] To further complicate matters, the International Refugee Organization (IRO) created in 1946 lacked the support of the Soviet Union and did not assist ethnic Germans who had once lived there.[336] Ethnic Germans from the Soviet Union were not DPs either because of their German citizenship. They were sometimes termed expellees and other times deemed "stateless."

The Mennonite Church Brethren understood the importance of immigration eligibility and lobbied strongly as seen in the following excerpt from a January 1946 letter to the Honorable J.A. Glen.

> The pronouncement of 'eligibility' or 'ineligibility' is of far-reaching importance. If you are declared to be eligible you have certain rights and privileges under IRO; if you are declared ineligible you have no rights under IRO. The ineligible ones cannot be processed by IRO officials. They are denied access to IRO camps for medical and political screening; they cannot ride military or CCG trains; they cannot leave Germany and cross an International

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[334] Gerald Daniel Cohen, *In War's Wake: Europe's Displaced Persons in the Postwar Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 56.
[335] Naomi S. Stern, "Evian's Legacy: The Holocaust, the United Nations Refugee Convention, and Post-War Refugee Legislation in the United States" *Georgetown Immigration Law Journal* 19, no. 313 (2004): 321, 323.
[336] Hans Werner, *Imagined Homes: Soviet German Immigrants in Two Cities* (Winnepeg, Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 2007), 57. Some Germans from Russia found a loophole by arguing their ancestry was Dutch rather than German and were thus able to immigrate to Canada under the IRO (Werner 65).

> Boundary. They are not entitled to the same food rations of D.P.'s under IRO.[337]

Out of the predicament that ethnic Germans found themselves in emerged several solutions. The first was decidedly Mennonite - the issuing of Menno Passes. These passes were distributed by Mennonite leaders in western Germany to Mennonite individuals who had lived in Ukraine, were resettled, and then had fled to western Germany. While never officially recognized, for a time, these Menno Passes were accepted and allowed the holder many of the privileges of eligible Displaced Persons (DPs). These benefits included free transportation on the German railroad and rations.[338]

The second and more daring solution was to claim Russian nationality. As seen in chapter four, some Mennonite ethnic Germans had escaped repatriation by arguing that they were Dutch and thereby receiving sanctuary in Holland. Others who were ready to immigrate, however, discovered that it was more conducive to claim Russian. Desiring to immigrate, they used their Soviet birthplaces and previous Soviet citizenship to claim Soviet nationality. Arguing that they were in political danger due to the USSR's system of punishment for collaborators, they were able to immigrate to the United States using the Soviet quota number. One decade earlier, in the 1930s and early 1940s, ethnic Germans living in Ukraine and other parts of the Soviet Union had tried their best to show that they, while ethnically German, were loyal Soviet citizens. While the German

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[337] MHC Board of Colonization 1325/960, Canadian Christian Council for Resettlement of Refugees (Outside the Mandate of the I.R.O.) to Hon. J.A. Glen, Minister of Mines and Resources, 14 Jan. 1946 In T.D. Regehr, "Of Dutch or German Ancestry?: Mennonite Refugees, MCC, and the International Refugee Organization " *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 13 (1995).

[338] Regehr, "Of Dutch or German Ancestry?: Mennonite Refugees, MCC, and the International Refugee Organization," 12.

invasion changed those priorities, the decision to claim Russian nationality (not Soviet citizenship) speaks to the political changes that occurred during the war and to the physical journey these ethnic Germans took during World War II.

Researchers are able to trace the change in claimed nationality from 1941 to 1943 through the post-war period because of ethnic German records. When the German Army first occupied Ukraine, ethnic Germans registered with the *VoMi.* The German identification issued to them in 1941 became part of the files compiled when they were processed for German citizenship in 1943. While these forms known as EWZ records were completed after they were brought back to the Reich, they show that, quite unsurprisingly, from 1941 to 1943 ethnic Germans adamantly argued they were 100 percent German. During the hectic months of 1945 as these same ethnic Germans fled their Polish farms and resettlement camps, often finding themselves caught in the Soviet Zone, their identity changed. In order to escape repatriation to the Soviet Union, some ethnic Germans created false papers that claimed that they had been born in East Prussia or Alsace Lorraine.[339] A few years later when, after successfully evading repatriation, they no longer claimed German nationality when applying for immigration to North America. The International Red Cross Tracing Service Records are an untapped resource for researchers desiring to follow individuals throughout the chaos of post-World War II Europe. These records prove that individuals who, less than ten years earlier, claimed to be 100 percent German argued just as strongly that they were of Russian nationality.

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[339] Lilly Zaft, Interview with Author, Mercersburg, PA. Dec. 13, 2014. Justina Neufeld, *A Family Torn Apart* (Kitchener, Ontario: Pandora Press, 2003), 146.

For instance, take the case of Wilhelm Kampen. Born in Dnepropetrovsk, Ukraine in 1911, he lived in the Chortitza settlement from 1925 to 1937. Claiming he was 100 percent German in his EWZ paperwork, he also attested that he primarily spoke German at home and in public.[340] He received German citizenship on April 3, 1944. In December of 1945 though he filled out an A.E.F. DP Registration Card where he claimed to be of Russian nationality.[341] He stated that he spoke Russian more fluently than German. Regardless of whether the EWZ form or DP registration card held the correct information regarding Kampen's linguistic abilities and nationality, he is an example of the agency that ethnic Germans born in the Soviet Union had and used when most advantageous.

Although there were Soviet birthplaces to provide evidence of Russian nationality, not all claims were taken at face value. Peter Dyck, an ethnic German Mennonite born in 1925, lived in Blumengart, an ethnic German village in the Chortitza settlement. He first claimed Russian nationality when trying to immigrate to Canada. Although he did eventually immigrate in 1948, his Russian nationality claims were challenged. When immigration officials found out he was an ethnic German, Dyck's record claiming Russian nationality was marked for destruction. On his second IRO registration card, German nationality and an explanation for why he did not qualify as a DP filled the lines. "Reason: Not a ref. [refugee] or DP," was the explanation.[342]

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[340] Captured German War Records A3342, EWZ Records Series 50. Roll D062, Frames 2610-2622. National Archives, College Park, Maryland.
[341] Wilhelm Kampen. AEF DP Registration Card. ITS. USHMM.
[342] Peter Dyck, IRO-N-226. A.E.F. Assembly Center Registration Card. International Red Cross Tracing Service Records (ITS). U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM).

Other individuals made similar changes. Mennonite Abram Dyck of Chortitza had papers identifying him first as German and then later as Polish. His identification card bore the same note as Peter Dyck's stating that Abram Dyck was neither a refugee or displaced person.[343] While he was probably resettled to Poland after leaving Chortitza, his brief sojourn there from 1943 to 1945 would hardly have granted him Polish nationality.[344] Records indicate that in 1950, Abram Dyck was living in a DP camp in Gronau, Westfalia where he claimed Russian nationality (presumably to be eligible for DP benefits).[345] He finally immigrated in 1955 to Canada aboard the ship *Neptunia.*[346]

These examples of ITS records illustrate how notions of nationality were used as a tool by ethnic Germans to translate past experiences into present assets. If German nationality did not obtain the desired results, than ethnic Germans were willing to claim Polish or Russian nationality. ITS records indicate that ethnic Germans who stated they were actually Russian successfully immigrated, often to Canada, much earlier than other ethnic Germans.[347] Thus, Russian nationality leading to IRO or DP status did translate into not only successful but more rapid immigration.[348]

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[343] Abram Dyck, IRO-N-226. A.E.F. Assembly Center Registration Card. ITS. USHMM.
[344] Ibid.
[345] Abram Dyck, October 1950, File 200B/20. ITS. USHMM.
[346] Abram Dyck. Neuverkartung. ITS. USHMM.
[347] There were, of course, many variants involved including religion (Mennonite versus other), family size, and sponsor availability. Mennonite ethnic Germans had the added advantage of belonging to a church with a powerful lobbying presence both in Canada as well as western Europe. Peter Dyck, A.E.F. Center Assembly Registration Card, International Red Cross Tracing Service Records. U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. Johann Dyck, File 6-1822, ITS, USHMM. Mathilde Epp, File F6-1955, ITS, USHMM. Maria Epp, File F6-1893, ITS, USHMM. Margarethe Epp, A.E.F. Center Assembly Registration Card, ITS, USHMM. Margarete Epp, File F6-1823, ITS, USHMM. Heinrich Epp, File F6-1955, ITS, USHMM. Hans Epp, File F6-1823, ITS, USHMM. Elisabeth Epp, File F6-1947, ITS, USHMM. David Epp, File F6-1823,

Aussiedler

What happened then to the ethnic Germans who left Ukraine? The Zaft family stayed in touch with the handful of Adventist Chortitzans that had immigrated to the United States with them including William Henry Hann, Albert and Karl Konrad, Edward and Waldemar Koehn, and Helena Hann. In 1978 there was a reunion held in Espelkamp of ethnic Germans who had been resettled from the Chortitza area.[349] The Diepholz newspaper ran a story in 2007 on the Zaft family after a local family from Rehden visited the Zaft children in America.[350] The newspaper told the story of how the Zafts had arrived in Rehden and then ten years later immigrated. Although in the beginning the Zafts had to prove they could contribute to the community, years later they were not remembered as bothersome refugees but as beloved villagers.[351] In 2015, neighbors in Rehden still remembered the Zaft family and the invitations to come visit them in America. The memory of Espelkamp, now a town and no longer a camp,

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ITS, USHMM. Walentin Kampen, A.E.F. Center Assembly Registration Card, ITS, USHMM. Johann Kampen, File F6-1825, ITS, USHMM. Peter Klassen, A.E.F. Center Assembly Registration Card, ITS, USHMM. Margarete Rempel, File F6-1823, ITS, USHMM. Kaethe Rempel, File F6-1976, ITS, USHMM. Jakob Rempel, File F6-1823, ITS, USHMM. Johann Thiessen, File F6-2444, ITS, USHMM.

[348] Despite this help, ethnic Germans were not able to easily immigrate to Canada until 1947 and 1948. The first country that opened its doors to ethnic German Mennonites was Paraguay. The ship *Volendam* carried 2,303 people to Paraguay in February 1947. It was not until 1947 that after several years of navigating stringent immigration laws and sending appeals to the Canadian government that ethnic Germans would be good citizens that 500 individuals immigrated to Canada with the number of immigrants increasing in 1948 to the thousands. Peter J. Dyck, *Up From the Rubble* (Scottdale, Penn: Herald Press, 1991), 207. Jacob Neufeld, *Path of Thorns: Soviet Mennonite Life under Communist and Nazi Rule* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1991), 364.

[349] Horst Gerlach, "Mennonites, the Molotschna, and the *Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle* in the Second World War" *Mennonite Life* (Sept. 1986): 8.

[350] "Mit Chronik und 'Gaense' - Buch Nach Amerika," *Diepholzer Kreisblatt* , Nov. 15, 2007.

[351] The newspaper article touted how one of the Zaft sons had become a prosperous electrician in the United States and that he had received his training through as an apprentice in Rehden.

remained in the German-Russian Mennonite church established there and in the stories of former Pax Boys who returned to the United States many years ago.[352]

There is, however, a more striking presence of the ethnic Germans in Diepholz, Rehden, and Espelkamp than a Mennonite church or a newspaper article. The presence of *Aussiedler,* ethnic Germans who lived in the Soviet Union until the latter part of the twentieth century, have kept the memory of ethnic Germans from Russia alive. The majority of *Aussiedler* who returned to Germany came after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 although some immigrated earlier in the 1970s. German law stated that claims to German heritage qualified them for not only immigration but German citizenship. The opportunity to reunite with family members in a place that held better economic prospects encouraged individuals to return to Germany. Their dwellings in Germany are easy to identify today - new subdivisions built with government grants that have sprouted up outside long-established towns and villages. The *Aussiedler* themselves are also easy to recognize in twenty-first century grocery stores and churches with the women often wearing headscarves and skirts, their hair coiled in buns on their head - although perhaps more a sign of their Mennonite faith than their Russian past. Though they are finally "home" the debate regarding the *Aussiedler* remains politically charged. The questions that once haunted ethnic Germans in the 1940s continues today: What right do *Aussiedler* have to return at the expense of the German government? Are they truly German? Do they belong in an integrated German society?

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[352]Erika Weidemann, *Espelkamp Mennonite Church*, May 26, 2015, Espelkamp, Germany. Kenneth Yoder, Interview with Author, Grantsville, Maryland. July 3, 2015.

Conclusion

The saga of ethnic Germans during World War II was fraught with danger and change, deception and loyalty. At the beginning of the war, the Soviet Union and Germany both wanted to move the ethnic Germans living in Chortitza and the other towns that dotted the map of the Soviet Union. Germany believed that these *Volksdeutsche* could be used as a core group to expand Germany's cultural dominance while laying claim to eastern territories. The Soviet Union, deeming ethnic Germans as untrustworthy, saw them as a national security threat. During the German occupation, Chortitza reinforced its German identity and the absence of Soviet rule enabled open displays of German culture such as language. Yet, ethnic Germans were also very much within the grasp of Nazi Germany. The powerful *VoMi* was intricately involved in the lives of the ethnic Germans living in Chortitza. This organization was tasked with determining whether ethnic Germans truly were German; even when ethnicity was satisfactorily proven in Ukraine, ethnic Germans had to undergo more testing once they arrived in the Reich. As ethnic Germans navigated unpredictable and, at times, inconsistent Nazi criteria, they did their best to assimilate in order to receive food rations, housing, and other basic necessities. Even after the war, ethnic Germans were still viewed as desirable repatriates by the Soviet Union. Therefore, ethnic Germans continued to use their malleable identity not only to escape repatriation through physical flight but to gain IRO or DP status. DP status brought not only material benefits like food rations, but it also aided in immigration. The DP quota was open to them, their medical exams were paid for, and their transportation to North America secured.

Sometimes this meant assuming a different identity again. For others, particularly Mennonite ethnic Germans, a Dutch identity was more beneficial. For many, a malleable identity helped them not only survive the war but reestablish their lives when it was over.

The history of ethnic Germans during World War II is more than the story of individuals caught in the middle of a tug of war between two powerful states. The history of ethnic Germans is important because it shows their use of agency during the war as they navigated changing circumstances. The ethnic German story as a case study helps historians look beyond the ideologies of the Soviet and Nazi powers to the individuals from Chortitza who tried to fulfill those expectations.

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